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THIS WEEK

> NASCAR

12 Smoke 'em if you got 'em



A restyled Tony Stewart and a revamped Monte Carlo put NASCAR's bad boy in a good place: kissing the champion's trophy. By Matt Crossman

> NFL 18 A dying breed

Lorenzo Neal is the league's best at a position that is gradually becoming obsolete. Discover the classic fullback and the ways he can influence a game. By Dan Pompei

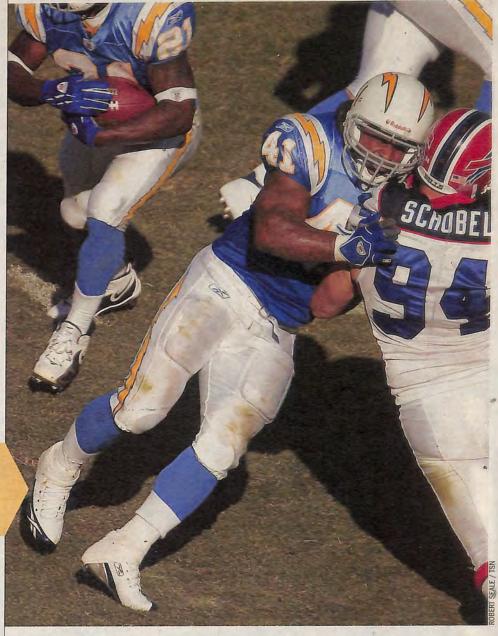
COVER > GIFT GUIDE STORY 22 Buy weeks

111 ways to give the gift of sports this holiday season ... really.



COVER: PHOTO BY DAVE HOGAN / GETTY IMAGES; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JACK KRUYNE / TSN

> Send your editorial comments or complaints to Senior VP/Editorial Director John Rawlings at jrawlings@sportingnews.com.



4 KNOW IT ALL

- To Know List A fan's guide to December.
- Fly. Plus, Bob Hille's Starting 5.
- Cyber Bashing An anti-you website is the true mark of success (or lack thereof). Plus, Your Turn.
- Sports Talk with ... Ken Howard of The White Shadow.
- Fanscape Video game reviews and Jerry Rice on the dance floor.
- Exposure bends over backward to do a good job.

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- **64 DAVE KINDRED** Gado-this guy is something.



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HOLIDAY GIFT HINT KIT

1. CUT ALONG THE DOTTED LINE

AND APPLY A STAMP:

2. LEAVE WHERE YOUR FAMILY CAN EASILY FIND IT.

Dear Santa,

This year I have been slightly better

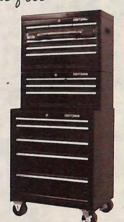
so I really really hope for a

Craftsman Tool Storage Chest.

PS: It's the one with the free

Intermediate Chest.

. "Item # 59778"



Santa

Santa's workshop

The North Pole



THIS HOLIDAY GET WHAT YOU WISH FOR.

CRAFTSMAN°

MAKES ANYTHING POSSIBLE



OKNOWLST

6 trips to the Thanksgiving trough

DECEMBER 2005

FRI 2

This whole Chase for the Nextel Cup deal was entertaining and all, but they're still talking about the catfight that erupted the time Tony Stewart and Bobby Labonte showed up at NASCAR's awards show (9 p.m., TNT) in the same Interstate Batteries tux.

■ Knicks at Pistons (8 p.m., ESPN). Larry Brown takes a proper beating. And after he watches LeBron at the Sonics in the back end of this doubleheader, he kicks himself for good measure,

Better double-check that guest list, Mr. Busch.



SAT 3

There is a God, and He bestows upon you Texas at 1 p.m. (Big 12 title game), USC at 4:30 (vs. UCLA) and Miami at 8 (ACC title game). ABC televises all three for fear of eternal damnation.

SUN 4

Hell is not having DirecTV as **Falcons at Panthers, Bengals** at Steelers and Cowboys at Giants all kick off at 1 p.m.

MON 5

You have to admire the pure, unadulterated gluttony of baseball's winter meetings, where eight-figure deals are consummated by men who fudge \$8 scotch and waters as "food" on expense reports.

SAT 10

Duke vs. Texas (1:30 p.m., CBS) in East Rutherford, N.J. Sorry if we injured anybody while bum-rushing the Blue Devils bandwagon.

> Hoist one for all the fat linemen out there as pretty boys Matt Leinart, Reggie Bush and Vince Young are on parade at the **Heisman Trophy** presentation

> > (8 p.m., ESPN).

SUN 11

Giants at Eagles (4:05 p.m., FOX). Apart from their tragically inept receivers, their hopelessly injured quarterback and a new sheriff named Eli rolling into town, the NFC champs really are in surprisingly good shape.



WED 14

SAT 17

Suns at Mays, then

Rockets at Warriors in an

ESPN double-dip starting at

8-a heck of a night for the

Bucs at Pats (1:30

p.m., FOX), Chiefs at Giants (5 p.m., CBS) and

Browns at Bills (8:30

that glorious six-week

as Sundurdays. Louisville at

p.m., ESPN). It's the start of

stretch known to NFL fans

Kentucky (2 p.m., CBS).

games like this, too.

Sundurdays were made for

international pastime.

SUN 18

Falcons at Bears (8:30 p.m., ESPN). Hey, if the White Sox could do it, why not the ... you're right, that's ridiculous.



TUE 20 New **Orleans Bowl**

(8 p.m., ESPN). The first-and worst-of a preposterous 28 bowl games.

THU 22

Poinsettia Bowl (10:30 p.m., ESPN2). Not exactly the Grabowski of bowl names, is it?

If it's old-school blood and guts you're craving, Senators at Flyers is the game for you. I'm speaking hypothetically, of course, as there's no freaking way for

percent of us to watch it.



Heat at Pistons (8 p.m., TNT). The Shaq Daddy of 'em all in the East.

Holiday Bowl (8 p.m. ESPN). It's not the Rose Bowl. but it's always high-scoring and often a shocker (see: Texas Tech 45, Cal 31 in '04).

SAT 31

Broncos at Chargers (4:30 p.m., CBS). Watch 'em run the ball, watch the clock melt away. Which reminds me: Happy New Year! -Steve Greenberg

SAT 24

Maybe it gets better than Cowboys at Panthers (1 p.m., FOX) and Colts at Seahawks (4:15 p.m., CBS), and maybe it doesn't. All's I know is I ain't rich, Halle Berry ain't calling and my big ol' butt ain't leaving the house.

SUN 25

Not to get all preachy, but Christmas isn't all about you, you know? Think about those more fortunate than you, like the Spurs and Pistons (12:30 p.m., ABC), the Lakers and Heat (3 p.m., ABC), the Bears and Packers (5 p.m., FOX) and the Vikings and Ravens (8:30 p.m., ESPN).



IIII NASCAE CUP SERIES

Madden apologizes for on-air incident with turducken 'TSN 'Devastated' Holmgren loses battle with Atkins diet TSN Gruden to take week off to 'bang home' X-mas shopping

KNOWITALLKNO

DOES ANYBODY WANT THIS GUY?

Clearing up
the T.O. picture

Nobody is sure where Terrell Owens will play next season, but the list of teams that won't have him is starting to grow.

Among the clubs on that list are four that had been suspected as logical landing spots. Forget about Oakland (as long as Randy Moss is there), Atlanta (no interest from management), Seattle (trying to get rid of guys similar to T.O.) and Denver (owner Pat Bowlen is dead set against it, and no one there wants to mess with what has been a wonderful team chemistry).

That leaves the Redskins, Cowboys and Bucs as the leading candidates for Owens' services. The dark horse: the Ravens. They went after him once and could do it again. —Dan Pompei

All we know for sure is he'll

PLUS, HE'S GOT A BIG ARM Doug Flutie may be a wee man in NFL circles, but at 5-10 he's the tallest member of Maxim's "25 Greatest Short Dudes of All Time." (The shortest: Yoda, at 2-2.)



Whom will you most closely resemble after Thanksgiving weekend?

Tony
Siragusa

Charles Barkley

27%

David

Wells

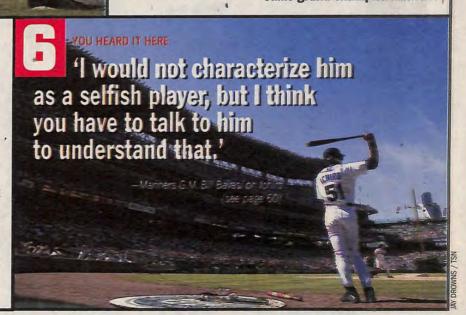
Sumo grand champion Akebono

college BASKETBALL It's the year of the real RPI

Don't get too excited. The NCAA Tournament selection committee will not be broadcasting its March deliberations gavel to gavel on cable access. But later this season, you can gain more insight into the process with the first release of the true Ratings Percentage Index standings—the magical RPI.

College basketball's RPI is a simple formula based on teams' winning percentages, those of their opponents and those of their opponents' opponents. Road wins are weighted more heavily and home wins less so. In the past, independent groups calculated RPI duplications for the public. *Official* RPI numbers will be released for the first time later this season, after enough games have been played to provide legitimate data.

Something that hasn't changed: The NCAA doesn't want fans to believe selections and seedings are made strictly according to the RPI. Says NCAA hoops vice president Greg Shaheen, "You cannot rely on a single mathematic formula." —*Mike DeCourcy*





Unproductive then injured running back **Ahman Green** says he's hurt the Packers haven't talked to him about a new contract. That's a twist: Ahman upset at the Pack for dropping the ball.

CAUGHTONTHEFLY

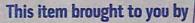
Nobody does branding like Texas

The town of Clark, Texas, has agreed to change its name to Dish as part of an advertising campaign for Dish Network. In exchange, every household will get 10 years of free satellite TV programming. Before you judge the town, you try getting Texans games on the local broadcast.



McGraw gets snubbed for 'Best Halftime Video'

The Country Music Awards made a big splash in the big city last week, as the event was warmly received by New Yorkers. Well, except by those who heard big country was playing the Garden and thought, "Oh crap, Isiah just signed Bryant Reeves."

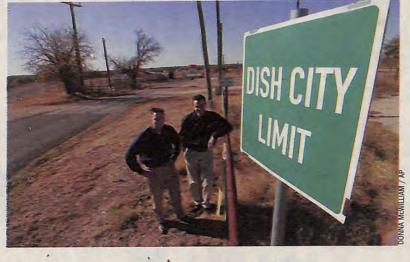


Great blocking helped lead the way during the Patriots' championship runs, but this year the team has struggled running the ball and Tom Brady has gotten pounded. In fact, the linemen haven't looked anything like themselves, prompting Fly to wonder: Who again was in charge of identity theft protection?

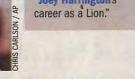
BUILD IT. AND THEY STILL WON'T COME

Kansas City was awarded a future Super Bowl on the condition major renovations, including a rolling roof, be made to Arrowhead Stadium. There also is talk that the same roof will be used at Kauífman Stadium in an effort to appeal to the Royals' fair-weather fans.





The Pistons.
Two weeks into
the season they
already had seven
wins. Or as they call
seven wins in Detroit,
"Joey Harrington's
career as a lion"



Charge leveled against Vlade (and no flop jokes)

Officials in the SerbiaMontenegro army have said
Vlade Divac is a draft dodger.
That accusation is extremely
hurtful to him on two fronts.
One, he is considered a hero
in his country, so this could
damage his popularity. Two,
Divac now lives in Los Angeles,
where no one wants to be
known as a dodger.

Hey, didn't you used to be the well-oiled machine known as the Toronto Raptors?



Steroids.
Baseball
announced a
tougher drug-testing
policy the same
week its annual
awards were
released. But, really, I
thought Bud stepped
over the line with his
"MVPee" jokes.

He proved at K-State that he's as good a football coach as you'll ever find in Manhattan, Kansas. Providing you can, y'know, ever find Manhattan, Kansas.



Sergei Fedorov. He arrived in Columbus as a multifaceted offensive threat. Do you want to make the Jim Tressel joke or shall !?

The Bears.
Two got into it at an FBI shooting range during a cookout at which alcohol was served. Football, fistfights, guns and beer. Wait, don't tell me. Barry Switzer did the catering, right?

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CYBER BASHING

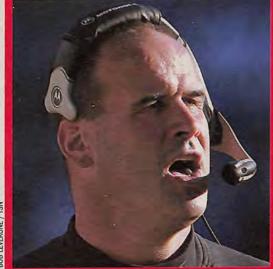
The true mark of success (or lack thereof): an anti-you website

Think you had a bad week at work? Stuff your gripes in a sack, Buck-o, because you don't know what hardship is. Imagine if every time you jammed the copier, ate the last break-room bagel or got caught stealing office pens, you not only heard about it from your boss but a new anti-you website popped

That's right. Your own personal htmlhole. Welcome to the life of a coach in the age of the Internet.

Back in August, Cubs manager Dusty Baker bemoaned the fact he was being "run out of town." Why?

"FireDustyBaker.com," he said.
But what Dusty didn't know was
that it could have been worse. He
could have been Texas A&M coach
Dennis Franchione, who not only
is enduring two websites
dedicated to his ouster—
FireDennisFranchione.com and
Franunderfire.com—but even has
a website reserved for the removal
of his defensive coordinator:
FireCarlTorbush.com. There, you



When Tice was a little boy, surely he dreamed of someday being in a position where scores of people would dedicate their time to securing his unemployment.

start websites. And hawk merchandise, like the Hoosiers fans who put up FireMikeDavis.com, where you can get coffee mugs, license plate frames and thongs. My wife is proclaiming your incompetence on her underwear, coach. Take that!

Past success is not good enough. If a coach has a firing website, it's probably because that coach has risen high enough to earn a high-profile job. They don't give out these fired, and he now describes the website as his "legacy to coaching." Zook is something of a Jackie Robinson for Internet bashees.

(Zook will be happy to know that, less than a season into the new guy's tenure in Gainesville, there is a FireCoachMeyer.com.)

You don't even have to be a coach to earn dot.com distinction. The Bengals fansite, MikeBrownsucks.com, outlines reasons that, uh, Mike Brown sucks. Superagent Drew Rosenhaus is targeted on FireDrewRosenhaus.com. The removal of White Sox broadcaster Ken "Hawk" Harrelson is the goal of HeavetheHawk.com.





can purchase a Fire Torbush Tshirt, which is a great icebreaker at parties. (Stranger: "Who's Torbush?" You: "Defensive coordinator at Texas A&M." Stranger: "Oh.")

Or he could have been Vikings coach Mike Tice. Sure, there's the standard FireMikeTice.com. But that wasn't urgent enough for the guys who started FireMikeTiceNow.com.

Seems a coach doesn't matter until there is a fire-him website. Fans don't boo or call radio talk shows anymore. Real fans spots to ordinary Joes. Just ask the folks at FireJoeTorre.com. Or FireJoePaterno.com.

You get to last season's Super Bowl and you wind up with FireAndyReid.com (which, actually, is a site designed to prevent Reid-bashing). You win the Super Bowl with one of the NFL's saddest-sack franchises, but a couple of years pass and it's FireJonGruden.com.

Then there's Ron Zook. Remember when FireRonZook.com went up hours after Zook was hired at Florida in 2002? Zook was The good news is website registrations eventually must be renewed, and most of these sites wind up in the superhighway's ether. That's what happened to FireScottLayden.com and the UCLA double whammy, LoseLavin.com and FireLavin.com.

If you're a coach who's looking at a bad week and an even worse website, relax. The website will disappear (probably about the same time as your employment). Enjoy it while it lasts. Heck, while you're there, order a thong.

-Sean Deveney

YOURTURN

Unbelievable! How can West Virginia not crack your top 25 (TSN, November 18)? Jerry West and I are not amused. —Creighton Waters, Martinsburg, W.Va.



themselves. —Tommy Ashley, Clayton, N.C.

■ So Paul Attner isn't happy with the NFC North or the NFL's playoff system? Never mind that before Week 10, the first-place Bears were one game better than God's gift to football, the Patriots, who led their mediocre division. It makes no sense to send

division winners on the road for their first playoff game. A title is a title, no matter how good or bad the competition. —Steve Metsch, LaGrange, III.

■I am a great fan of the SPORTING NEWS. But why must you always find a way to include Brett Favre on a list (TSN, November 18)? The top five quarterbacks who are older than 33? Are there more than five? This list is roughly the equivalent of the all-time leading passers of the XFL. —Loren J. Rudd, Louisville

■ Thank you, Paul Attner, for your recent article on the life

of Wellington Mara (TSN, November 11). George Steinbrenner could be responsible for the salvation of baseball if he would put his ego and greed aside and do what Mr. Mara did for football. —David J. Panasiti, Tyrone, Pa.

Send letters to 10176 Corporate Square Drive, Suite 200, St. Louis, MO 63132, or to yourturn@sportingnews.com.

TALLKNOW TAL

Sports talk with ... Ken Howard



Howard played Ken Reeves, an NBA journeyman turned Carver High coach on the old-school TV drama The White Shadow, now available on DVD.

WHITE SHADOW

TSN: You played college ball at Amherst. How did your career as a player influence the show?

HOWARD: I also played at Manhasset High on Long Island for a wonderful coach named Fritz Mueller. My nickname was "White Shadow." My senior year, I was the only white guy starting. Our colors were orange and blue, like Carver High. There were two brothers named Thorpe and a guy named Jackson who were my teammates. There were guys named Thorpe and Jackson on the show. And, as Ken Reeves, I dressed a lot like Fritz Mueller did.

TSN: Do players and coaches recognize you today, nearly 25 years later?

HOWARD: It happens at events or charity golf outings. Coaches, especially, are so sweet. Coach K, Bobby Cremins, Tommy Heinsohn, they all call me *Coach*. So, it's, "Hey, Coach, come here and meet this guy." I have somehow become welcome in that world.

TSN: So, I have to know, could Coolidge really dunk?

HOWARD: Oh, yeah. He's 6-8½. They had to lower the basket for me to dunk, but the

actor who played Coolidge, Byron Stewart, he could dunk with no problem. He was a pretty good player. **TSN:** My favorite Ken Reeves line: "Let's move it,

ladies!" Coaches can't say that anymore. **HOWARD:** No, that is an old-school thing, very
New York. Someone might get offended now.

TSN: Why is it that Carver never played any road games?

HOWARD: No, no, there were some. One of my



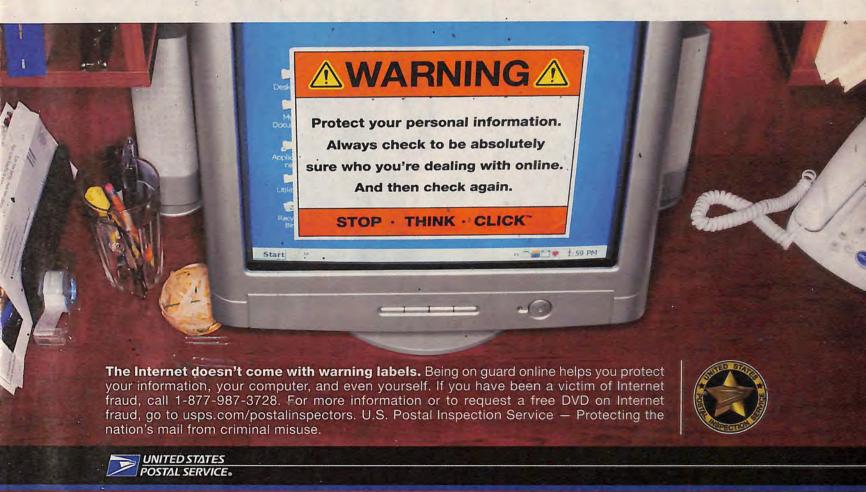
Kobe Bryant's ball-hogging wouldn't fly with ol' Kenny Reeves.

favorite scenes was at a high school in Pasadena. where the camera is panning across their side of the bleachers and everyone is white and blond, and their cheerleaders are doing these really tame cheers. Then the camera keeps going and you see the Carver cheerleaders and their side of the stands and it is all black, and there is a whole other rhythm going on. It was a great scene. But, you are right; we played an inordinate

number of home games.

TSN: What would Ken Reeves do with some of the more self-centered NBA guys playing today?

HOWARD: Too much one-on-one, that's the problem with the NBA now. But it's a different world. In the NBA, the difference is money and power. Ken Reeves could sit a guy down or kick him off the team until he gets it together. You can't do that in the NBA. —Sean Deveney



FANSCAPE

A lifestyle guide for the dedicated nonathlete

TECH SUPPORT

Coming to a cell phone near you

Sure, you might claim to love EA Sports'
Madden NFL 06. But do you love it enough to leave
your cell phone company?

EA and Verizon Wireless are teaming up to offer the entire line of EA Sports' games on mobile phones. Now, true fans have a tough decision to make: Do they stay with their current providers until their contracts are up, or do they succumb to the allure of playing NBA Live on the 8:15 into the city, tear up their contracts and walk into their nearest Verizon stores?

The games are offered as part of Verizon's "Get'It Now" package and will work only on V Cast-enabled phones (for the list, go to <u>verizonwireless.com</u>). Currently, Madden is the only EA game offered (although there are other non-EA titles available, such as Bases Loaded and NCAA Football), but Verizon plans to roll out everything from FIFA 06 to Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06 and, yes, NBA Live. The games cost \$6.99 each for unlimited play or \$3.49 for a one-month subscription. —*Rich O'Malley*





These cell phone screen shots of the new Madden game aren't bad, but you need the right phone—not to mention the right eyesight.

UNDER REVIEW

Getting down and dirty



Free from the oppression of the No Fun League, Midway presents an over-the-top take on pro football in **Blitz: The League**.

When the NFL entered an exclusive deal with EA Sports, it left video game makers such as Midway to explore football on their own terms. Blitz is a story-driven game about an 8-on-8 football league in which vicious hits are rewarded with cash, injured players are injected with "juice" and sent back onto

Ready ... set ... try not to let your players get killed out there.



Paul Tagliabue probably would call it a bit of a nightmare.

The frenetic gameplay is complicated by having to hit complex button combinations to make game-changing plays. It's an OK change of pace, but the officially licensed Madden game from EA still is the

way to go. -Seth Elkin

the field and power-mongering

owners will do whatever it takes to

win. It's a bit of Playmakers, a bit of

Any Given Sunday and a bit of XFL.

How sweet the sound

You're sitting at the sports bar, faithfully watching your favorite team play, desperately wondering what's being said because someone decided your game wasn't worthy of having the volume on. Even though that might be a plus in some situations, there are other times you really do want to hear what those announcers have to say.

Well, now there's a way to hear your game without slipping a twenty to the smirking bartender. TableSound, a wireless audio system that can transmit up to four signals to speakers at individual tables, offers fans a way to control which game they hear. The system costs \$755 for a four-speaker setup and \$1,995 for 24 speakers, a small price to keep fans from fighting over the remote control. Now all we need is a way to choose the announcing teams. —Shawn Reid



-Tricia Garner

(Spike's Pros vs. Joes is the

other). And you thought

retirement was full of

Matlock reruns.

shuffleboard games and

Odds are Rice will have his most attractive on-screen partner since John Taylor.

Send questions for Mr. Jockularity and other Fanscape missives to fanscape@sportingnews.com.

TALLKNOWITAL









[EXPOSURE]

BANG-UP JOB Sometimes—as Kings goalie Mathieu Garon learned in this collision with the Blackhawks' Matt Ellison—bending over backward to help your team win hurts like hell.



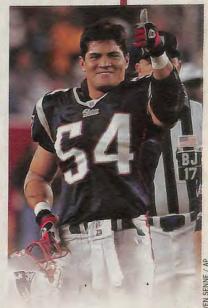
New York's finest.

Man, oh, man, those Mannings sure are good. But what do they have in common besides the standard-bearing last name? Our story on 24-year-old Eli, in his second season with the Giants, will analyze how he'has progressed as quickly as he has and also examine how he still must improve if he ever is to compare with the almost incomparable Peyton. We'll also look back on the 2005 NASCAR season and explain what it all means for 2006, advance the huge December 3 games in college football and let you in on what really happens at baseball's winter meetings.



presents
SPORTING NEWS

Champion



Tedy Bruschi

Tedy Bruschi had established his championship mettle as the defensive heart and soul of the Patriots, but 10 days after winning his third Super Bowl ring he was hospitalized with numbness, blurred vision and headaches. He had suffered a stroke; barely able to walk and see, his NFL future was very much in doubt. He later underwent surgery to repair a hole in his heart. But his condition gradually improved, and he began to work out with the hope of rejoining the team. After being cleared to play by an army of doctors, he returned in an emotional Week 8 win against the Bills. Before long, he was knocking down passes, leaping over blockers and crunching ballcarriers. Bruschi is back, fiery as ever.

> Sporting News editors choose one player each month whose performance demonstrates the "Character of a Champion."

JOHN DUNN FOR TS

NASCAR rint 12 . SPORTING NEWS . 12/2/05

TWGE as\G

Smoke's climb to the top was a lot smoother this time around.



A toned-down TONY STEWART can enjoy a second Cup championship By Matt Crossman

or a guy obsessed with racing, Tony Stewart doesn't like driving much. He once said that if he had to drive the length of a Nextel Cup race in a regular car without listening to music or stopping for a Coke, he would "want to commit arson" when he got out of the car.

And it's not just regular driving that bores him. He hates testing his racecar. He drew criticism for blowing off testing before the Daytona 500, a process he described on his team website as "watching paint dry." (When he's testing at Daytona, he's going 190 to 200 mph. That's wicked paint, no?)

You could see how much skipping testing really hurt him when he led the most laps in the Daytona 500 and won the track's July race in historic fashion, setting a race record for laps led. The controversy surrounding Jimmie Johnson focused on his using tests that didn't belong to him; Stewart's name came up because somebody else tested his car for him.

In Stewart's mind, going fast doesn't matter; winning does. What's the point of going fast if

TSN's POWER POLL

- 1. Tony Stewart. If Smoke can maintain this attitude through 2006, he'll be racing for a third title.
- **2. Greg Biffle.** He won't let a mere 35 points stand between him and the top of the standings.
- ▲ 3. Carl Edwards. His natural ability will carry him to multiple championships.
- 4. Mark Martin. He'll come back fighting in his final season.
- Jimmie Johnson. Don't be surprised if this team is tweaked in the offseason.
- **6. Ryan Newman.** The Rocketman must convert his poles to victories to be a title contender.
- Matt Kenseth. This will be the comeback team of 2006.
- 8. Rusty Wallace. The last of the cowboys will be missed on the track
- → 9. Jeremy Mayfield. Team changes will force this team into a rebuilding year.
- 10. Kurt Busch. Busch, the 2004 champion, needs a fresh start.

One to watch: Jeff Gordon. The team looked like the No. 24 gang of old with three top fives in the final five races.

there's no one to leave behind?

Yet it was a test early in the year at Michigan that led to the best season of Stewart's career. Finishing 15th in the Ford 400 last Sunday at Homestead and winning his second Cup title cemented his legacy among the greatest racers ever. And his attitude in winning the NASCAR Nextel Cup altered his legacy as one of the most cantankerous racers ever.

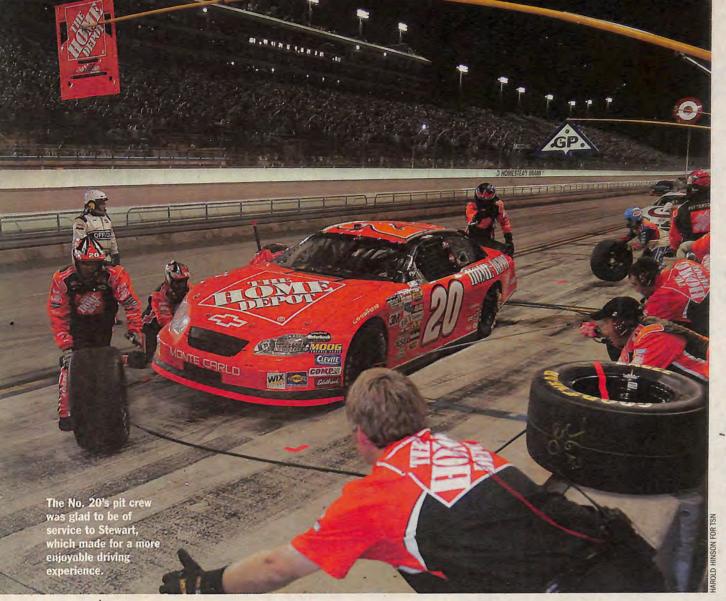
he difference before and after the Michigan test was so stark, it was as if crew chief Greg Zipadelli gave Stewart an entirely different car—the No. 20 team simply had struck the perfect balance. Before the first Michigan race, the average of Stewart's finishes was 16.14. After that race—he was second to Greg Biffle—it was 5.95.

If Zipadelli gave Stewart a new Monte Carlo, a new Stewart climbed into its seat. In the offseason, he moved back to Indiana, having purchased the house in which he grew up. Out of that idyllic house's doors came a kinder, gentler, happier Stewart, a fact with which therapists could have a field day. "I don't know who that guy is masquerading as Tony Stewart, but he's a different fella," says Benny Parsons, the 1973 champion and a commentator for NBC.

The new Stewart was on display all weekend at Homestead. On Friday, he was encircled by reporters gathered on the portico of a Miami hotel—a horrible situation for a guy who is claustrophobic and



Nearly lost in Stewart's conquest was a duel to the line between Martin (6) and the victorious Biffle, who's poised to win more than races in '06.



A tale of two titles

Both of Tony Stewart's Cup championships have come down to the season-ending race at Homestead-Miami Speedway. The two seasons, however, were not similar. Stewart's 2002 season was so full of controversy, the end brought more relief than celebration.

Stewart's run was virtually free of controversy in 2005, and the season was much more fun, at least by NASCAR standards. "It's not parties and jumping around," crew chief Greg Zipadelli says. "Fun in this sport is being able to relax a little." Nor was the team flawless, Zipadelli says, which should be scary for the rest of the Nextel Cup field.—*M.C.*



	2002	2005
Average start	13.2	12
Average finish	12.6	9.9
Wins	3	5
Top fives	15	17
Laps led	849	1,845

There were few smiles for the camera in 2002 as Stewart stormed to his first championship.

disdains press conferences. But it turned out to be a fascinating 15-minute adventure to the center of Stewart's mind.

He was curt and introspective, funny and hectoring. He lectured the media for focusing on the negative, yet he answered some questions about his season with short, sarcastic answers and questions about Kurt Busch's suspension with long, insightful answers. A reporter standing over Stewart's left shoulder told him, point-blank in front of a dozen tape recorders and a few TV cameras. that she used to be scared to interview him because he was so intimidating. You're mean, she might as well have said. The old Stewart probably would have cut her to the bone with a withering response. Instead, he admitted that at times he's not the most gracious guy in the world, but reporters don't see all of him, either.

The "new Stewart" angle only goes so far, of course. Stewart was

happier in 2005, but he was not lobotomized. He still got annoyed by what he viewed as overaggressive racing and blocking, and he still launched verbal bombs when he deemed them necessary. He called Greg Biffle an "idiot" at Martinsville. verbally jousted with Jimmie Johnson's crew chief, Chad Knaus, and was placed on probation for an incident with Brian Vickers after the Busch race at Watkins Glen.

Although the new Tony Stewart wasn't completely new, it was the same old Smoke behind the wheel, only better. The same things that have always driven him-a chip on his shoulder and a Jordanesque competitive streak-still burn within his firesuit. And his talent remains off the charts. Stewart's

hand-eye coordination is that of a juggler who handles flaming knives. Stewart's fingers are long and skinny, and they work in concert with his feet to put the car where he wants it, when he wants it. Nobody can command a car as Stewart can.

His car control is so extraordinarily splendid he rarely gets credit for being as smart as he is. At Homestead, he bided his time, waiting for his car to come around. He fought the urge to try to cram his car into ninth place—the finish that would guarantee the championship. He drove the car that was under him wisely instead of recklessly trying to drive the car he had dreamed about the night before.

Soon after Stewart finally worked his way into ninth place, Johnson, his closest competitor, put his own-car in the wall. That meant Stewart had to finish just 20th, which he probably could have done if he had steered with his knees.

But when he crossed the line



Johnson remains just good enough to come up short

Jimmie Johnson has finished in the top five in points in his first four full seasons at the Cup level, an unprecedented feat among active drivers. But as the old saying goes, you have to lose a championship before you win one, which means Johnson now has lost two—three if you count his rookie season, when he led in points after 29 races but faded to fifth.

He finished a distant second in 2003 and just eight points out last year. He entered Sunday's race second in points, 52 behind Tony Stewart, then crashed after a tire blew a little less than halfway through the race. The car

was too damaged to continue, so Johnson fell from second to fifth in points.

What's missing? Mojo, perhaps. Maybe the killer instinct. He certainly doesn't want for resources. Johnson is a talented driver working for an elite team with an elite crew chief.

"If you run (among the leaders) of the Chase for the championship, whether you win or lose doesn't really come down to how well you run," says Ray Evernham, owner of



Evernham Motorsports. "It comes down sometimes to circumstances out of your control—a crash, a blown tire, a broken part in the engine. If you're that close, it's hard to say you're missing something."

True enough, and Johnson said as much when he told reporters, "We did everything we could." But it's a safe bet his team will spend the offseason double-checking to make sure. —M.C.

15th—a few seconds after Biffle outdueled Mark Martin to the checkered flag—Stewart's knees were knocking and his eyes were misting.

Without doubt this is Stewart's most impressive season. Just judging by results, it's not close. Stewart dominated from Father's Day on. The team finished great when it had a great car and better than it should have when the car was weak, which was rare.

"He's capable of making a race team better than it is," Jeff Gordon says.

o which is more important,

Stewart's new attitude or his faster car? The miserable seasons past of Stewart's teammates at Joe Gibbs Racing suggest more than equipment fueled Stewart's success, but all the positive attitudes in the world won't make a lemon into lemonade. But chemistry is as important as engineering in making a car faster. "It all work's hand in hand," Parsons says. Zipadelli says the same thing. A fast car makes Stewart happy. A happy Stewart provides incentive for the crew to work harder, which makes the car faster, which makes Stewart happier, and so on.

Happier? Someone needs to come up with a stronger word than that to describe Stewart—the first man to win both a Winston Cup and a Nextel Cup. Leading up to the final race, he said winning his second championship would be "10 times sweeter" than his first because the first came in such a personally frustrating season.

Judging by his postrace glee last Sunday, Stewart underestimated how great it would be.

he end result of all this could be a more iconic career for Stewart than most observers previously had expected. It's no secret that Stewart longs for the days of his racing youth, when he mad-dashed his way around dirt tracks on circuits nobody with clean fingernails has

heard of, driving a beat-up old van from race to race, eating dinner at Waffle House at 2 a.m., making just enough money to pay his bills and keep racing.

Clearly he has forgotten how bad those times were. After the therapists deconstruct his house purchase, they can work on how he has romanticized those days.

It has been the prevailing notion that Stewart's NASCAR career would not be long, that he would tire of the stresses and go back to the simpler racing life. Stewart is noncommittal—he could race five more years or 20 more years—but he sounds more optimistic about his future these days. After the way this season played out, those who know Stewart best think he might stick around longer and keep piling up championships.

"I think there's no reason in the world we can't come back next year and contend and the year after and contend—as long as we do our job and give him cars that are capable of running up front," Zipadelli says "It's not whether he can or not, it's whether he wants to or not. I don't know that he wants to any more than he did; he's just learned how to enjoy it."

Maybe next year Stewart will learn to enjoy testing.

Then again, why mess with success?

TSN



Instantexpert

Answers to all the NASCAR questions

you're afraid to ask

I keep hearing Joe Gibbs' name. What's he got to do with all of this?

Joe Gibbs owns Tony Stewart's race team, but he basically is a figurehead now that he's coaching the Redskins. Gibbs' son J.D. runs the operation. Gibbs now has three Cup championships to go with his three Super Bowl titles. Bobby Labonte won the 2000 championship for Gibbs.

How does this playoff system work again?

Ten drivers qualify for the playoffs, officially known as the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup, colloquially known as the Chase. The season's final 10 races make up the Chase. Drivers' points are recalibrated so that the top 10 are separated in five-point increments. The highest qualifying driver starts with 5,050 points, second place has 5,045, and so on.

How long is the offseason?

Every driver, crew chief and team member would respond, "What offseason?"

The first race of 2006 is an exhibition event on February 11. The first points race is the Daytona 500 on February 19. But teams get little time off between now and then. They will work at the shop and at the track getting cars ready for next season.

What do I need to know about the champion?

Stewart is from Indiana. He is extremely talented; only Jeff Gordon has as much skill among NASCAR drivers. Stewart and Gordon are the only full-time drivers with more than one championship. Terry Labonte, now a part-time driver, also has two championships. —*M.C.*

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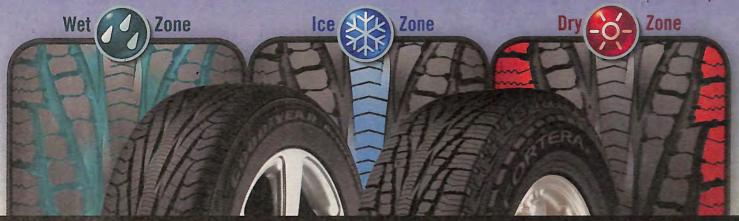


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Experience a day in the life of San Diego's LORENZO NEAL, an impact fullback who may well be the ...

By Dan Pompei

Photos by
Robert Seale / TSN

omeday, after your hair has

turned white, your spine has curved and your hearing has faded, the little child on your lap will ask, "Grandpa, what was a fullback?"

And you'll have to think back and remember. "Well, Billy," you'll say slowly, "a fullback was a football player who blocked. He took pleasure in clearing a path for others to make big plays. He wasn't in it for the dancing. Or the money. Or the media. A

what the fullback really did.

"They began dying off around the turn of the century, fullbacks did, replaced by hybrid backs, tight ends, H-backs and wide receivers. It became so hard to find a good one, NFL teams just said, "To heck with fullbacks.'"

lot of fans barely noticed him. Only the real students of the game even knew

Your memory isn't what it used to be, but you fish out a name.

Lorenzo Neal.

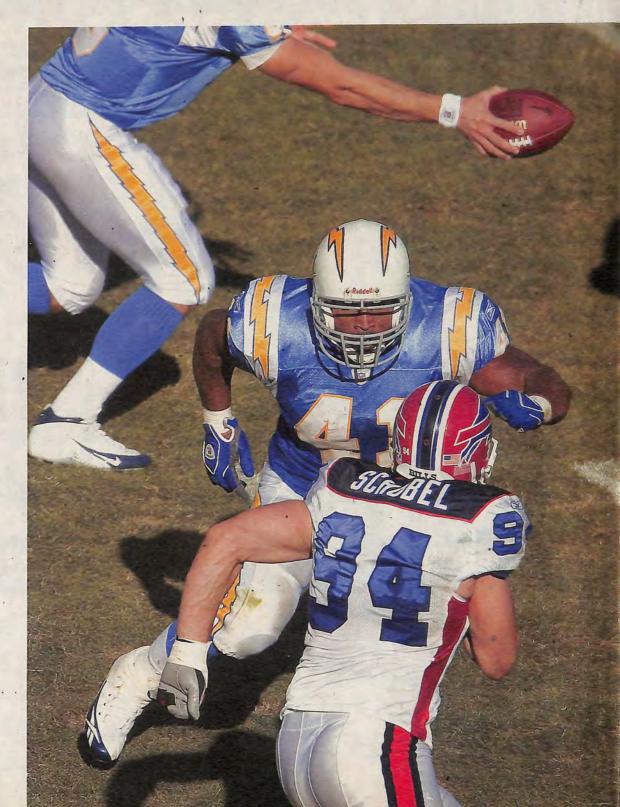
He was the fullback's fullback, the best blocker you ever saw. "He would rather knock a linebacker on his keister than take a handoff," you'll say. "He was the last of his kind."

This is a day in his life.

our hours before the Bills kick off to the Chargers, Lorenzo Neal trots onto the field at an empty Qualcomm Stadium. Outside in the parking lots, the sights of bare chests and sandals and the smells of sunscreen and ground beef testify to the beauty of the day. Neal runs around the perimeter of the field eight times. He listens to gospel music by Kirk Franklin on his iPod. Later, as the game approaches, he will switch to some 50 Cent.

If he is not ready to play by now, he never will be. He has been preparing for this game, for every game, since he first NFL

Last of a



dying

breed

started playing fullback 20 years ago as a high school freshman in Lemoore, Calif. He went to Fresno State, just up the road from Lemoore, and was drafted in the fourth round by the Saints in 1993. He also played for the Jets, Buccaneers, Titans and Bengals before moving to San Diego in 2003.

Neal takes pride in being more prepared than the next guy. It is what has enabled him to survive all these years while others like him have died off. His offseasons, he says, are 10 times more physically grueling than his seasons.

There is conditioning and lifting with a personal trainer, everything from pulling cars to running hills. There is wrestling with college kids at Fresno State, where he was an All-American junior heavýweight. There is boxing with former middleweight champion Paul Vaden. There is even ultimate fighting with mixed martial artist Chuck "Iceman" Liddell. Neal is typically in the gym by 5 a.m., and he works out up to three times daily.

"I know it makes the season easier," Neal says. "You might be a better athlete than me. You might be faster than me, stronger than me, but you're not going to outwork me. When guys are tired in the third and fourth quarter, I know what I've done to prepare for this."

n the first play after the kickoff, Neal is assigned to clear out the Bills' middle linebacker on a power play. He finds London Fletcher and drives him backward, and LaDainian Tomlinson runs for 12 yards.

Neal likes this play, but his favorite is the lead draw because of its isolation qualities. "Just me and the linebacker in the middle of the hole," he says.

Many "modern" fullbacks prefer to dive at the knees of defenders. That isn't Neal's style, although he will throw a cut block when it makes sense. "If it's me and a linebacker, it's like, 'Dude, why should I cut you when I know I can take you down?" he says. "I like to hit them in the mouth and say, 'Let's go.'"

At 5-10, 255, he has the perfect size to get beneath the shoulder



pads of most linebackers. Leverage is his game. Neal is known for leading with his forehead. "He has a great head for the position," Tomlinson says. "His head is huge."

Neal's big melon, in fact, is the source of much levity in the Chargers' locker room. "That's my moneymaker," Neal says. Of all the running backs, quarterbacks, receivers, tight ends and defensive backs on the team, only Neal wears an extra-large helmet shell, according to equipment manager Bob Wick. The only linebacker who wears an extra-large shell is Shawne Merriman, who has 6 inches and nearly 20 pounds on Neal.

Finding the linebacker on a lead

draw reminds Neal of one of his hobbies—"frogging," or frog hunting. Neal and friends, armed with a flashlight and a long three-pronged gig, will take out a boat well after dark. When they spot a bullfrog, they shine the light in its eyes, which freezes the amphibian. Next thing you know it's 3 a.m. back at Neal's house, and everyone is eating frog legs, potatoes and eggs.

eal kicks out into the flat on the first drive and catches a pass. Bills safety Troy Vincent comes up to make the tackle, and the collision is violent. Vincent's helmet flies one way, Vincent flies another, and his forehead is gashed open. "Got him good on that one," Neal says.

Neal has forged a career and, indeed, an identity out of such collisions. The man becomes the player, then the position, then the task. Neal is a block. Though he never has officially been diagnosed with a concussion, he has experienced some of the symptoms. Last season, a Raiders player—Neal still is not sure who—hit him so

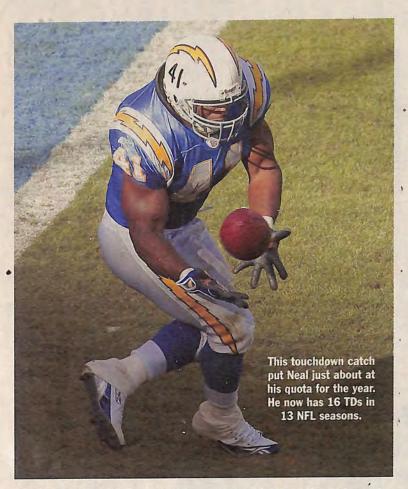
hard he had to lie down on the field for a minute.

"There are plays when you're hit, and it's like you get the flutters," he says. "You see stars. You've got that buzzzzzzzz. *OK, that was a good one.* You just try to breathe. It's happened thousands of times."

Fullbacks such as Neal probably incur more big-impact hits than players at any position. Virtually every play for Neal is a battle of bighorns vying for the highest ground.

He sees himself as a lineman with a lower number. "The only difference is I'm 5 yards deeper," he says. "And the linebacker is 5 yards deeper. So you have 10 yards of

There isn't much glory in blocking, but Neal (41) wouldn't have it any other way.



speed, compared with linemen who are 2 feet apart. The collisions are way harder. It's who's got the hardest head, who's going to quit first, who's going to fall apart first."

Perhaps Neal's most impressive accomplishment is not falling apart. Despite tens of thousands of body crashes, he hasn't missed a game because of injury since 1993, his rookie season. He has played in 186 straight games, an accomplishment of Favre-ian proportions. He credits

staying healthy to playing fast and the grace of God.

It's not like he ever tries to save himself. "Lorenzo doesn't care about his body, about his own well-being," Dallas defensive tackle La'Roi Glover says. "He just goes out there and throws his body around."

Remarkably, Neal has no major physical ailments. He has had one surgery, to repair a torn ankle ligament during his first pro year. What hurts 10 games into the season? "The bottom of my feet, from the cleats digging into my soles," hè says.

n this game, Neal becomes more than a role player. He catches a 2-yard pass for a touchdown on a fourth-and-1 in the second quarter. It is his first touchdown of the season and only the 16th of his career—11 of them on receptions. He does not save the ball or celebrate

much. After the game, he shrugs his shoulders. "A touchdown is a touchdown," he tells a group of reporters. "I just want to win."

Receptions and runs are diversions for Neal, a chip or two to go with the ham sandwich. He teases Chargers offensive coordinator Cam Cameron, telling him not to forget "the secret weapon." But he knows his place.

Early in his career, he played in some one-back sets for the Saints.





But he never has been a tailback. "It's not that I can't run the ball," says Neal, whose career average per *game* of 3.05 yards is more than a yard shy of Tomlinson's career average per *carry* of 4.32. "I just haven't done it a lot. I know what I do well—that's block. I found my niche."

Many of the game's more well-known fullbacks today— Atlanta's Justin Griffith, Kansas City's Tony Richardson, San Francisco's Fred Beasley, Tampa



Vincent (beneath Crowell) didn't lose his head when Neal plowed into him, but he did lose his helmet.

Bay's Mike Alstott—are more ballcarriers/receivers than blockers.

Neal wishes there were more like him who cared more about blocks than handoffs. "The fullback position is dying because it needs to be emphasized that a lot of fullbacks aren't runners, they're fullbacks," he says. "Go in there and do your jobblow up people. I think the fullback can be the heartbeat of the team, the heartbeat of an offense. You want to set a precedent, you want to make an attitude—the fullback can do it."

n the third quarter, on an off-tackle play, Neal makes a read to block outside linebacker Angelo Crowell. Tomlinson follows his fullback and runs for 19 yards.

On many plays, Neal determines where the run will go based on how he reads the defense. Tomlinson estimates he follows Neal on about 80 percent of his runs. "I trust his eyes and his decisions," Tomlinson says. "We're kind of on the same page. We think the same way." If they aren't on the same page, it's likely the run will be stopped before it should be.

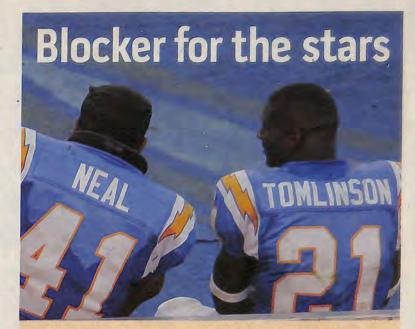
Neal is the ideal complement to Tomlinson, the game's most dynamic runner. He also is a nice complement off the field, where Tomlinson says Neal has taught him how to sacrifice and be a professional. They often watch game tape together, usually on Friday mornings before meetings, sometimes on their day off and often on plane rides. They also are golfing buddies who genuinely enjoy each other's company.

"L.T. is special," Neal says, "like lightning in a bottle. He's one of the most complete backs. He makes my job a lot easier. I've been blessed to block for a lot of great backs, but 'LaDainian is going to have a place in the history books."

efore the game, Neal had spoken on the phone with his friend Takeo Spikes, a former Cincinnati teammate and now a Buffalo linebacker who is on injured reserve. Neal had joked that he would be going after Fletcher and the Bills' other linebackers. So during the game, the linebackers kept reminding Neal of his "promise." "We know you're coming after us!" they'd yell. "Takeo told us!"

Redskins defensive coordinator Gregg Williams recalls hearing Neál call out opponents when both were with the Titans. "He was literally pointing out players and letting them know he was coming every single play," Williams says.

When Neal trash-talks an opponent, it isn't malicious. It's playful. A couple of years ago, after laying a good lick on an opponent, Neal asked the player sweetly, "Don't you know I'm the world's greatest?" "It has caught on. When he runs for a first down, teammates say, "That's The World's Greatest." When he gets jacked up by a



LaDainian Tomlinson is the fifth running back to have a 1,000-yard season running behind Lorenzo Neal. In fact, Neal has led the way for 1,000-yard rushers in each of the past eight seasons. The other four rushers, with commentary from Neal:

Corey Dillon, with Cincinnati in 2001 and 2002: "I used to call him 'the Gangster Back.' He'd try to run over you, run through you. He's strong and physical."

Eddie George, with Tennessee in 1999 and 2000: "He's a big boy, 6-3, so when he just fell it was going to be 3 yards. I had to block to get out of his way. Eddie was 4 yards and a cloud of dust. Just get downhill and run hard."

Warrick Dunn, with Tampa Bay in 1998: "He stays real low and squirts through little holes. He's real tough for being so small."

Adrian Murrell, with the Jets in 1997: "He was shifty and real elusive. He had quick, good feet." —D.P.

linebacker, it's "They got The World's Greatest!"

Neal likes to talk. On the field. In the locker room. On his cell phone. He could talk through a mouthguard. And he's funny. Tight end Antonio Gates says Neal is the funniest person on the team, by far. Neal has a quick smile and an easy laugh that put people at ease. Tomlinson says there is no one Neal does not get along with.

eal is on the field for 35 of the Chargers' 68 offensive snaps this day. During the Chargers' final drive in their 48-10 victory, he is on the sideline joking with the other veterans.

He gets a big kick out of second-year back Michael Turner's rushing for 44 yards and a touchdown on the drive. "We put in the big horse," Neal says. "We call him the little Shetland pony. He's half-horse, half-man—like Pegasus."

Neal estimates he has played in about 50 percent of the team's offensive plays this season, a lot more than most fullbacks.

He takes pride in being a dinosaur, as well as the torchbearer for the fullbacks who remain. He has mentored young Saints fullback Mike Karney, working out with him in the offseason. Neal talks with some of his fullback contemporaries who have retired, such as Sam Gash and Larry Centers. They rue the decline of their position.

After a game last year, Kansas City's Richardson and Neal posed for a picture. Richardson later sent Neal a framed 13x13 print that he had signed with the message, "Thanks for paving the way for fullbacks."

The issue is where the road Neal has helped pave is leading. At the very least, the position has been permanently de-emphasized. But it's possible the position of Bronko Nagurski and Jim Taylor and Marion Motley slowly is being phased out.

"If the position dies in the league,
-it dies," Neal says. "But as long as I'm
in this league, fullbacks won't die. I'm
not going to let my position die. On
Sunday, I'm going to show you why
the position is not dead."

TSN



ongratulations, my friend. If you're reading this, then somehow you have, for this brief moment, evaded the Holiday Shopping Season. Mind you, someone you know, maybe love, has been or is going to be up before sunrise at some point—probably over the Thanksgiving weekend—to get in line to get into a store to get into a frenzy of consumption.

It's Sam Walton's world, baby: we're just livin' in it (and paying h

It's Sam Walton's world, baby; we're just livin' in it (and paying his heirs for the privilege).

The Friday after Thanksgiving long has been called—say it with me—"the busiest shopping day of the year." (Pair it with the Sunday after Thanksgiving, which is called "the busiest travel day of the year," and surely you have the "busiestest" weekend of the year, but I digress.)

Some stand up to the fullcourt holiday shopping pressure. Like Hank Hill, the cartoon Texan (as if there were another kind, right?) on FOX who put his foot down and told his wife, Peggy, they were

not going Christmas shopping on Thanksgiving weekend because, among other reasons, he might miss some football on TV. Sound familiar, my friend?

Peggy gets the last say, however, in this cartoon tragicomedy: "Hank, the day after Thanksgiving is, in my opinion, the biggest shopping day of the year. And I will not spend another year giving Dallas Mavericks crap because the Cowboys stuff was all sold out."

If that puts the fear of God in you, then you should know we're here for you. Even if you don't have time to make a list and check it twice (really, it's OK to lust after—hell, it's encouraged to lust after—some of this stuff for yourself). Even if you're just trying to figure out how to get all your shopping done on Christmas Eve. The least we can do is this: offer you page after page of gifts—expensive and cheap, practical and fun, all sports-related and all lovingly uncovered by our crack crew of elves.

Read on, my friend. There has to be something you'll find that you can give instead of Dallas Mavericks crap.

Logo-a-go-go

If this is America, then odds are you can find just about anything with your favorite team, school or driver logo slapped on it. Like, for instance ...



Team light. C'mon, magnets, stickers and flags are sooo last millennium. Try a 12-volt logo that suctions to the window of your car, truck, SUV or cenverted school bus party wagon. \$32.50, universalshopping.com.

Snacks bowl.

A life-size NASCAR racing helmet that's actually a snacks bowl? Now you can finally know for sure what's in No. 20's head. \$44.95,

americantailgater.com.

Casket. If you were born a Sooner, raised a Sooner and a Sooner you will die, then prove it. Get a Collegiate Memorials casket bearing your school's logo (or many others). \$3,250-\$4,900 through your local funeral home.

Bottle opener. Yeah, yeah, we know, if you wanted someone yammering every time you popped a frosty, you'd stay home. But try one of these babies by Pacific Direct, and Hank Williams Jr. will serenade you with "Are you ready for some football?" (at least, if you buy an NFL one). From \$6.99, multiple sports, multiple retailers (try kitchencollection.com).

Stocking stuffers



Birdieball. A golf training/practice tool that feels and flies like a real golf ball, only not far ... which probably is like when you hit a real golf ball. \$3.99 each, \$23.99 a dozen, birdieball.com.





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Ballpark pens. Fine writing instruments handcrafted from wooden stadium seats removed from more than à dozen historic ballparks, including . Crosley Field and Comiskey Park. Ebbets Field and the Polo Grounds. Is this a great country or what? \$80 to \$150.

Sports Fan Voodoo Kit. Just a little helping hand if your mojo is on the wane. Includes a plush voodoo doll and a 64-page instruction book for casting spells against your rivals, such as Booboo Voodoo (simple injuries and mishaps), Pinning the Blame (creating internal dissent) and Voodoo Economics (money problems). \$12.95, perseusbooksgroup.com.





Head

Wincraft multisport helmet. By now we're all way past the equation of "Kid + Helmet = Dork." There's something to be said for a really cool noggin guard. Variety of sports/team logos, \$29.99, teamontop.com.





shoulders ...

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And a buck goes to the Armstrong Foundation, to boot. \$40, niketown.com.

knees ...

FootSmart Patella Knee Strap. Pain ended your budding athletic career? Try one of these babies, which reduces



and toes

Zoom LeBron III. It's not what you ask of him, it's what he asks of himself and, by the way, what he asks of Nike's rock star shoe designer Ken Link and his team. \$125. various retailers. (If you're old-school or just a last-minute shopper, the Black/Varsity Red-Black Jordan XIV Retro-M.J. was wearing it when he hit his last shot as a Bull-will be re-released on Christmas Eve. \$150, various retailers.)

knees ...

Under Armour Action Leggings. Keep those joints, from waist to ankles, toasty-warm. \$49.99, underarmour.com.

and toes

Adidas 1. A tiny microprocessor embedded in the arch of these running shoes monitors impact, pace and ground condition. Really. \$250, various retailers.

Socks and underwear

But, like Granny says as you're opening her gifts, not just any socks and not just any underwear.

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Minnesota Vikings thong. Because nothing says intimacy like NFL underwear. (But we're way too classy to make a party cruise crack here.)



"Jews for Jeter" T-shirt. Take vourself out to the ballgame and cheer your favorite Bomber in this tee (\$25) by Jewish Fashion Conspiracy. Pair it with a baseball yarmulke (\$12) for a fashion home run. chosencouture.com.

Jesus sports statues. Run to daylight or everlasting salvation, depending on how you look at it. Multiple sports available. \$19.95, stpatricksguild.com.



We couldn't make this up



Chicago Cubs doormat.

Go ahead, White Sox fans, if you haven't had enough fun

already. \$49.95, wrigleyvillesport.com.

Boston Red Sox spare tire cover. Perfect for your Jeep or for David Wells between starts. \$35.99, amazon.com (search-"sports & outdoors").

Randy Moss real mask. Now you, too, can inspire your teammates with your/his "time-to-go-to-war 'fro." \$49.95, therealrandymoss.com.

Got a gift story to share, such as the best one you ever got? Or maybe the best one you ever gave? The author and his elves want to hear it and maybe share it with other TSN readers. Go to Bob Hille's blog at sportingnews.com/experts/bob-hille/index.html.



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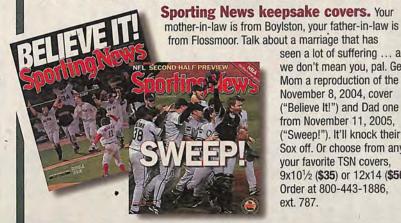
on radio.sportingnews.com and for \$4.95 a month you gain access to every show and every interview that has aired in the past seven days, including the new Tony Bruno Show, J.B., Tim Brando and Troy Aikman. Or take a 14-day free trial of Sporting News Radio with Real SuperPass, then pay \$12.99 a month for tons of great radio content and enhanced performance with RealPlayer Plus.





Sportingnews.com. It's a veritable carnival midway of information (the War Room, NFL Draft Central and much more for only \$39.99 a year), games (tons of fantasy games and Strat-O-Matic at a variety of prices) and even the occasional sideshow freak (if you count the guy in the next cubicle you'll be gaming against).

Sporting News shop. Can't seem to drag your lazy butt off the couch? We feel your lethargy. So go ahead and order your favorite teams' jerseys, caps, watches, tailgate items and more online at shop.sportingnews.com. (But do us a favor-don't ask for a special deal on that Terrell Owens replica Eagles jersey.)



seen a lot of suffering ... and we don't mean you, pal. Get Mom a reproduction of the November 8, 2004, cover ("Believe It!") and Dad one from November 11, 2005, ("Sweep!"). It'll knock their Sox off. Or choose from any of your favorite TSN covers. 9x101/2 (\$35) or 12x14 (\$50). Order at 800-443-1886, ext. 787.

Sure, they're expensive ... but, dammit, you're worth it

Air hockey table. We've never been much into foosball (unless it's tabletop foosball, \$79.95, solutions.com). But air hockey? We've deep-bruised a thigh or two playing this "sport." Go to justairhockeytables.com, do your homework and plan on dropping about \$1,000 for a really good table.

Zooka ZS740. This portable pitching machine maxes out at 65 mph just in case, y'know, Jamie Moyer isn't available for your practice. \$599, zooka.com.



Autographed Donovan McNabb Eagles

helmet. We're flat out of T.O. jokes, so this is just in case you're really an Eagles fan with some cash to throw. \$566.00, findgift.com.

Roy Hobbs baseball gloves. Who has time to break in a glove? Not the folks who buy mitts made from "Game Worn Leather." \$124.95, sportsnmore.com. (Wonderboy and Savoy Special sold separately.)



EYEPORT Vision Improvement System.

Give it 10 minutes a day and it'll improve your eyes' ability to aim, track and focus, which might just come in handy if you're trying to hit Billy Wagner's gas or catch a Peyton Manning pass over the middle. \$199.95, sharperimage.com.

For your gaming pleasure

Available at electronics and video retailers everywhere (prices vary from \$19.99 to \$59.99 according to title, blank video game stare included):



- FIFA Soccer 06
- Madden NFL 06
- Major League Baseball 2K5: World Series Edition



- NASCAR 06: Total Team Control
- NBA 2K6
- NBA Live 06
- NCAA Football 06
- NCAA March Madness 06
- NHL 2K6
- NHL 06
- Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06 -
- Top Spin tennis

If you have to ask ...

Bondurant SuperKart School. Are you going *to* races all your life or are you going to finally get *in* the race, pal? This school for souped-up karts near Phoenix has multiple course offerings, such as a half-day intro (\$375) and a three-day karting clinic (\$2,125) that will take you from beginner to grizzled karter. Contact the school at bondurantsuperkarts.com for information and availability.

2006 Arctic Cat F7 Firecat EFI Tony Stewart snowmobile.

At 140 horses with double-wishbone A-arms and Arctic Cat gas (IFP) shocks, this custom snowmobile screams not only "where there's Smoke there's fire" but now "where there's snow and ice there's Smoke," too. Approximately \$8,500 at Arctic Cat dealers.



1966 Orioles Fantasy Camp. If you remember who the Orioles strummed 40 years ago, then you might want to toss the ibuprofen and Absorbine Jr. in the bag and head to Sarasota from

January 29 to February 5 to play with your heroes. (Hey, is that Brooksie?) **\$4,195**, including airfare from Charm City. E-mail fancamp@orioles.com for more information.



The 2006 Winter Olympics. You say Turin, we say Torino. Turin, Torino, let's call the good folks at cosport.com.

Packages, including event tickets, vary in price based on length of-stay in Italy for the Games, which run February 10-26, 2006. For five days and four nights in a three-star accommodation with tickets to at least one event per day, expect to spend \$8,000 per person, double occupancy.



February is all fun and Games when price is no consideration.

GM Kodiak/TopKick pickup. Mpg?

How d'ya know your truck's even got mpg? For some really big pickup buyers, like Shaq, for instance, it's still "go big or go home." Well-appointed by Monroe Truck Equipment of Monroe, Wis., at up to \$85,000, this one includes two choices of leather seating,

two choices of leather seating, chassis and cab air suspension, polished stainless steel step tubes, custom GM exterior paint, brushed-aluminum or wood-grain dash trim, rear-seat DVD, fold-flat

rear seat and more. Check it out at monroetruck.com.



Thought for food

Tailgating essentials. Depending on where you're from, the party isn't complete without, say, Nathan's Famous Franks or Utz chips or Corky's ribs and barbecue or Junior's peaches and cream cobbler cheesecake or, what the hell, all of the above. Various prices, qvc.com.



The Internet doesn't come with warning labels. So always be on guard when you're online. For more information and a free DVD on Internet fraud prevention, visit usps.com/postalinspectors.



The virtual tailgater

Yes, barely a month ago, the Sporting News told you exactly how and when to tailgate at Lambeau Field (Buzzer Beaters, TSN, November 4). But hey, that was back when the weather was passable in Green Bay. By this time, if

you haven't been adding Prestone to your bloodstream (if you know what we mean, and we think you do), then you could freeze your buns and bratwursts off.

Our solution: Mimic the perfect tailgate without leaving the warmth of your home. Sure, some will mock you, berate you, even call you a Texans fan. The perfect response: "Oh, yeah? Well, I can feel my frickin' fingers and toes!'

In short, embrace your inner weenie with a few essentials.

Indoor-specific clothing. You won't be wearing that camo snowmobile suit with the tres chic hunter orange knit cap to top it off, but you will want to back your team with a nice assortment of apparel. Just to get one little laugh, pull on a pair of Walkabout Slipper Socks with your

team's logo as part of the nonskid bottoms. They're warm, fuzzy and spirited! (\$13.99, sportssection.com.)

Indoor games. What says tailgate like throwing the ol' pigskin? Because you're indoors, you don't want to be throwing around a real football, especially if you've got Harrington-like tendencies. So have a NERF NFL Team Football on hand (\$7.99, hasbro.com); you still can break things with it, but at least you can tell the landlord you tried to keep the damage to a minimum.

Indoor barbecue grill. No indoor fires and no "oven-cooked" ribs. When we saw the Crock-Pot BBQ Pit (\$119.99, various retailers), which can cook pork, beef or chicken low and slow on any countertop in any kitchen ... well, we had only one response: God bless America.

Indoor beverage assistance. The best thing about the virtual tailgate? No pesky rent-a-cops standing between your kitchen fridge and the TV in

the living room, saying, "You'll have to finish that beer before you can go in, sir." Rejoice, my friend, because now you are in the perfect place to strap on your Beer Belt (\$19.89, prankplace.com). Oh, and if you want to get a chuckle from the folks at your virtual tailgate, wait till one of them says something derogatory about your team, do a beer fast draw and say, "I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die." Trust us, it's a killer every time.

Indoor box seats. Depending on what kind of seats you want to mimic after you've gotten your fill of food and drink, you can plant yourself in front of anything from a 19-inch screen to a 60-incher.

Us? We like to envision ourselves as being in pretty darn good seats but still among the regular folks. Thus we'll opt for the LG Electronics Flatron L3200TF, a flat-screen dual-function monitor (\$1,999.99, various retailers.) It's a

> 32-inch LCD TV and computer monitor in one, which-eat your hearts out, Stadium People—is ideal for watching the game, then checking your fantasy team on sportingnews.com (great for video games at halftime, too). It's especially useful for all you bachelors out there who live in tiny apartments ... and pretend you're tailgating, when all you're really doing is watching a football game on TV.



Crock-Pot 'cue, a (Beer) belt or two and a flat-screen view. It's all part of the perfect indoor tailgate. ..





Fore by fore. Starting in '06, rangefinders will be legal on the PGA Tour. Don't act like an amateurget Bushnell's Yardage Pro Tour Laser Rangefinder model 20-0002.



Multimedia

The Arena Basketball League. Long story short, it's an authentic live-action NBA-style shooting competition that challenges mall-goers (yes, mall-goers) to pay as little as \$2 to see whether they have what it takes to win iPods, Sony PSPs, EA Sports videogames and more. Check out arenabasketballleague.com for current and coming-soon locations.



Riding Giants special edition DVD.

This documentary is the definitive exploration of big-wave surfing. Even if you've never hung one, let alone 10, you can appreciate that, right? \$24.96, amazon.com.

The Great American Baseball Box.



More than four hours of music, historic play-byplay and on- and off-the-field moments make this four-CD baby a combination love letter to and celebration of The Game: \$59.98, shoutfactory.com.

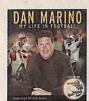
PlayStation Portable.

Baseball, basketball, football, hockey. Play all the sports (and even a few we don't consider sports) you can get in your hot little hands ... at least until PS3 distracts you in the spring. \$249.99, sonystyle.com.

Plus ...

Three good books at the recommendation of the good doctor (that would be Steve Gietschier, senior managing editor in TSN's research center):

Dan Marino: My Life in Football



With Dave Hyde. (Triumph Books, \$29.95.) A pictorial autobiography that comes

with a DVD, "Where the Dream Began," that is a fine documentary all by itself.

Romo: My Life on the Edge: Living Dreams and



Slaying Dragons

Bill Romanowski, with Adam Schefter and Phil Towle. (William

Morrow, \$24.95.) A candid, ruthless confessional. Think drug testing can eliminate drugs from pro sports? Think again.

Blue Blood: Duke-Carolina, Inside the Most Storied Rivalry



in College Hoops



Art Chansky. (Thomas Dunne Books, \$25.95.) It's not the first book about Tobacco Road and certainly

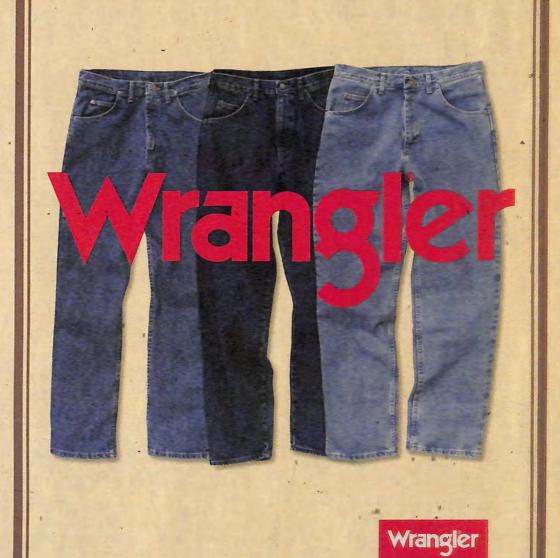
won't be the last, but it's a good one. It benefits from the inside access Chansky has enjoyed since seeing his first Duke-Carolina game in 1968.



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A 30-second guide to shopping for three

big-ticket items



Size matters when it comes to TVs. But size up room, too.

HDTV

Figure your price range. If you think-you can score a 42-inch high-def plasma for under 2 large, you're either dreaming or you're buying out of your cousin's SUV. On the other hand, there are really good, pretty big TVs out there for around \$2,000.

Think about your room size. Admit it; size matters when it comes to TVs. But if your La-Z-Boy is four feet from your current set, then you don't need that 60-inch screen, pixel-breath.

Define the technology. Rear-projection TVs are big and heavy; plasma TVs are thin and heavy (literally and on the wallet); microdisplay TVs (DLP, LCD and LCoS) are a bit less expensive. It's a 30-second guide, for cryin' out loud, you're going to have to do'some homework on your own.

Consider your source. The image is only as good as the source, which means you're looking at digital cable or satellite for the best sports buffet.

Test, test, test. You're going to have to get out there and look. Try to do it in a setting that mimics your living room (read: not at the Mega LoMart), look at the image from several angles, and see whether Mr. Sales Guy will let you mess with the TVs' settings.

Buy it. You want something that will handle fast-action programming, like sports and, yeah, OK, sports video games. We won't direct you to a specific model (like, say, a Sony WEGA), but we think you're smart enough to find your dream TV (like, say, a Sony WEGA) at a price you can afford.

Golf driver

Think about your game. What's your handicap? If you're still answering, "One leg is shorter than the other," then 1) you've *got* to get a new joke, and 2) you don't need a \$500 driver, you need lessons.

Know the technology. If automakers had as many engineers working on fuel efficiency as clubmakers have on spin-to-launch angle ratios, face deflection, moments of inertia and centers of gravity, then we'd be driving to Granny's on half a tank.

Narrow the field. Yes, looks matter, and, yeah, because we're Americans, by God, name brands do, too. But do yourself a favor: Do some homework about "game-improvement" clubs vs. clubs for low handicappers, then read up on shafts and grips, too.

Get professional help. If you're the type who doesn't have your trousers tailored because, y'know, you don't want some dude putting his tape measure where it doesn't belong, well ... the pros at your local golf center or pro shop should be able to put you in front of a launch monitor to get the right fit (shaft, degree of loft, etc.) without ever laying a hand on you.

Grip 'em and rip 'em. You wouldn't buy a \$500 suit without trying it on, right? OK, maybe

you would, just to keep the tailor's hands off of you. But there are demo days and club-tryout programs all across this great land of ours. See whether you can snag your finalists for consecutive 18s and play them in game situations. Translation: Grab the latest and



Be a swinger before you spring for an expensive club.

greatest, like, say, a TaylorMade r7 quad TP, Nike SasQuatch Tour 460, Callaway Big Bertha Fusion FT-3 and Ping G5 and let the big dogs hunt. (Sorry, we had to say that.)



Don't make a snap decision. Focus on your needs.

Digital camera

Know yourself. Back when you still had a VCR, did it constantly blink 12:00? Oh, you've still got a VCR? Then you're probably not the type who's going to sit down and read a 123-page owners' manual to find out what a lot of settings and buttons mean.

Know your needs. If the busiest camera days in your family are when the presents are being opened or for the Big Pose at Old Faithful, then save your money. You don't need a \$2K Konica.

It's the megapixels, stupid.

Long story short: More is better and more is more expensive, though not completely necessary. For most people's needs, four megapixels is plenty. But, remember, this is a 30-second guide. Do yourself a favor and do the homework on the Internet.

Single-lens reflex vs. point 'n' shoot. Little Ashley's made the varsity, and you want to shoot night games. You need a faster shutter speed, wider aperture settings, a longer lens and more. Then you're definitely looking at an SLR camera. But have faith; you can get a good one for around \$1,000. Proof? Check out and compare a Canon EOS Digital Rebel XT, a Nikon D70s and an Olympus EVOLT E-500.

Thanks for the memory. If you're still reading, then you should know that if you're going to drop serious cash on a camera, you're probably going to want a decent-sized memory card. You'll pay around \$45 for a 512mb card. —B.H.

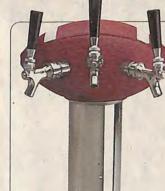
Last

For all things alcohol (but we draw the line at beer helmets):



Sneaky Shorts.

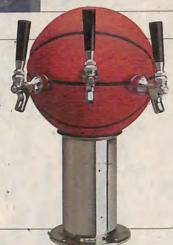
We would nevernever!--promote anything illegal, but we will tip our hats to the kind of good " old-fashioned American ingenuity that comes up with a wearable, concealable, 24-ounce beverage container. \$19.99, drsneaky.com.



Sports-themed beer towers.

Suds drinkers look at these babies like Harley riders look at Orange County Choppers. The two- and three-tap versions, in basketball or football theme, feature a 4-inch chrome column and are glycol cooled. \$725-\$740,

micromatic.com.



Flasks, flasks, flasks.

From prankplace.com's dual-flask "barnoculars" (\$19.89) and sippable cell phone (\$14.89) to handcrafted stainless steel NASCAR and NFL hipsters (\$24.90, uptownenterprises.com).

Personal B.A.C. detector. "Why not." it says, "determine your own blood alcohol concentation before a state trooper does? Backlit for night use." \$49.95, herringtoncatalog.com.



For the kids



Team Baby DVD. Get the little ones indoctrinated ... er, exposed to your favorite college with a DVD such as Baby Longhorn ("raising tomorrow's UT fan today"). After all, who needs Bob the Builder when you've got Mack the Recruiter, right? Each 30-minute DVD includes footage of the school's

sports teams, mascot, marching band and campus attractions. \$19.95, teambabyentertainment.com.

Sports menorah. Because everyone is sold out of sports dreidels (seriously), this is perfect for the yung (or yung at heart) sports fan. \$54.95, traditionsjewishqifts.com.

Flick It & Kick It football.

If you're like us, you killed hours in the auto-maintenance tool room in high school playing the notebook paper version of this tabletop football game. Now you can teach your kids how to get D's, too ... until they call you a "tool" and send you to your



room, Comes in basketball, too, with baseball ... available soon. From \$7.95, fikifootball.com.



Got a future Laker or Laker Girl in your crib? Entertain the little one with a Mascot Mobile. Choose from a variety of pro teams or your favorite colleges (we particularly like the Texas A&M one that



features Reveille rotating to "The Aggie War Hymn"). \$50, mascotopia.com.

SPORTING NEWS' CHARACTER OF A Champion

Sporting News, has been selecting them all year. Now it's up to you to vote for the athlete who best demonstrates that what's inside matters most and has the true "Character of a Champion."

Voting begins Monday, December 5th. Go to sportingnews.com/coac



















THE STUFF INSIDE MATTERS MUST.



Santa, baby

OK, so we didn't let assistant editor Shawn Reid climb up on our lap (don't ask), but a young fella's gotta speak up for all the young fellas you might be shopping

So use Shawn's wish list to fill in the visions of Gen-Y sugar plums dancing in someone you know's head ... or something like that:



cool/useful things

1. 3 Nights in August, by Buzz Bissinger (\$25, various retailers). It's a must-read for any baseball fan who has asked "What was he thinking?" after a managerial move.

2. Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders calendar. Hey, I've got to know what day it is, right? And who doesn't love Cowboys cheerleaders? (Especially at \$15.95 from calendars.com.)

3. Laser Baseball. I can know how hard I throw without having to chase down one of those radar stations on the side of the highway. This ball (\$29.95 at The Sharper Image) measures the mph of the toss at impact.

4. NCAA March Madness 06 (\$39.95, various retailers). Every year, EA adds something to the best college basketball game around. I want to turn my favorite team into a dynasty just like a real head coach would, including using assistant coaches' scouting reports for key games. There is one thing missing-the ability to attract big-time recruits with some booster bonus money.

5. Major League on DVD (\$8.69,

dvdempire.com). Hey, who doesn't love the Wild Thing?



expensive things

1. Personal trainer. It's one thing to watch sports. It's time to get back to peak (or closer-to-peak) form. But, hey, I don't want to get stuck with the yoga guru. Price will vary, depending on service.

2. High-definition big-screen TV. I want a TV that's going to make every one of my friends want to come to my house for all the big games. I'll go with the 60-inch Grand WEGA from Sony (\$4,999.99, various retailers).

PlayStation 3 won't be out until spring, so ... it's a tough decision. Do I wait another four months for Sony's PS3, or do I make the leap now and get the Xbox 360 (\$399.99, various retailers)? Are you kidding? I'm an instant gratification

3. Xbox 360.

kind of quy.

4. iJoy Turbo 2 robotic massage chair. What good is a huge TV without a great chair (\$899.95, The Sharper Image)? It's everything my future wife will hate: a faux leather, robotic massage

recliner with a built-in cup . holder. Perfect! And if she says it's gone after the wedding ... well, I'll have the massage function to keep me company after we break up, right?



1. Shot glass chess set (\$50, redenvelope.com).

Just search for "shot glass chess set" on the website. C'mon, what goes together better than shot glass and chess set?

2. Dale Earnhardt/Dale Jr./Jeff Gordon pet ID tags (\$6.99, nascar.com). Because if Miss Kitty gets lost, the first thing I want

people to see is my favorite driver's number. I just hope Miss Kitty's finder doesn't like that other guy.

3. Barry Bonds bobblehead (\$19.99,

mlb.com). OK, so it's funny in a creepy sort of way. You know, his head has grown so much in the past five years that real-life Barry looks like a bobblehead.



logoed things

1. Scottish Football **Player Christmas Lawn** Ornament. Available in any NFL team's colors. Nothing says Merry Christmas in a tackier, more garish way than a mini football player.

Hilarious, (\$69.99, nfl.com)

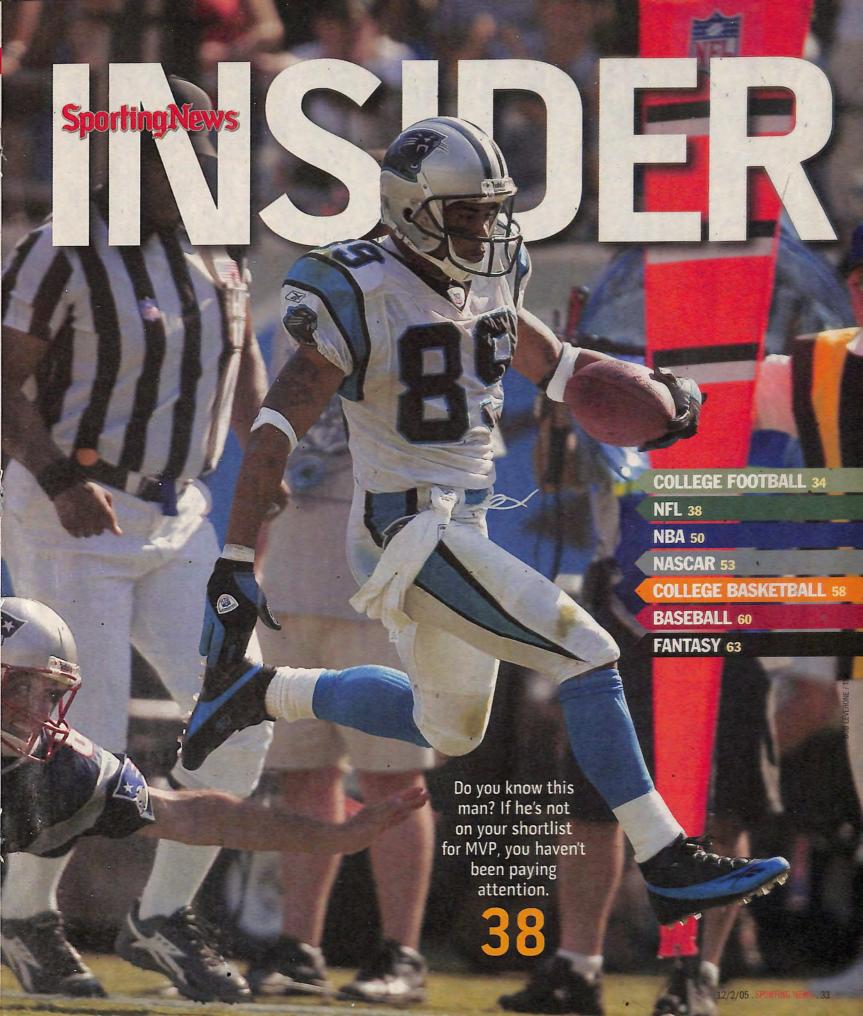
2. NBA throwback jersey. (Prices vary depending on the retailer.) Hey, if my favorite player can't wear a throwback jersey of his favorite player to the game, at least I can, right? You know, just to show my solidarity.



So I've got that great TV and chair. Well, I want to hear the snot bubbles pop when my favorite linebacker makes a big hit. Let's add the Bose Acoustimass 16 home entertainment system (\$1,299).



Contributing to the Gift Guide: Corrie Anderson, Sue Dorn, Steve Gietschier, Jason Goodrich, Steve Greenberg, Lesley Hunt, Katie Koss, Chris Littmann, Michael McNamara, Stan McNeal, Mike Nahrstedt, Shawn Reid, Kathy Sheldon, Kyle Veltrop.



COLLEGE FOOTBALL

INSIDER MATT HAYES mhayes@sportingnews.com

And for its next trick, Auburn will lose one game in 2006 and somehow find a way to the Fiesta Bowl national championship game.

Give the first national title to the SEC

oor Aubie. Best team in the nation last season and couldn't play for the national championship. Best team in the SEC this year and can't play for the league championship. Maybe the Eufaula (Ala.) Tribune will give the Tigers some paper championship again. That, or Auburn will have to settle for my designation of being the best team in the best conference.

Seriously, who wants to play the Tigers now? Get a glimpse of the Iron Bowl? Did you see the balanced offense, the train of a tailback in Kenny Irons and any of the 11 sacks, 20 hurries and 15 knockdowns Alabama quarterback Brodie Croyle had to endure?

Think how well Auburn is playing and understand this: The Tigers' reward could be only the Citrus or Cotton Bowl. Such is life in the SEC, where the best team won't play again for six weeks and the two that will play in the conference championship are both scant plays from being unbeaten.

LSU blew a 21-0 lead to Tennessee in its SEC opener and lost in overtime but has won every game since. Georgia got an untimely injury to quarterback D.J. Shockley and lost to Florida, a team the Bulldogs could have beaten by two touchdowns had he played. The Dawgs then lost two weeks later to Auburn after the Tigers completed a fourth-and-forever late in the game.

Now, here's where it gets scary: If Florida and Georgia win this week as favorites, the SEC would have four teams with nine wins and another with eight. Yet, I keep hearing about



the SEC being overrated because its teams are offensively challenged. Maybe—just maybe—that's because there are six SEC defenses among the top 16 in the nation. And unless you are the Southern California Trojans, you win big games with defense.

I know Big Ten and ACC snobs will point out that their conferences each has seven bowl-eligible teams (and the ACC will have eight after this week). I don't care. Bowl eligibility doesn't equate to strength of conference. The Big 12 could have eight bowl-eligible teams if Kansas beats lowa State this weekend, and we know how brutally tough the Big 12 is (that's sarcasm, folks).

"I know every coach thinks their conference is the toughest," says Auburn coach Tommy Tuberville. "But those guys aren't playing in this league week in and week out." Auburn—which has been feeding opponents a heavy dose of Irons—stands as the best team in the best conference but couldn't qualify for the league championship game.

OK, Tubs. I'm a believer. So where exactly does everyone else stand?

2. ACC. This used to be a finesse league. Not anymore. The shame of it all: The ACC and SEC play only once in the bowl season. But the ACC has won the past four Peach Bowls against SEC teams by a combined 100-37.

teams by a combined 100-37.

3. Big Ten. Penn State is the story of the year in college football, but there's plenty of disappointment after that. Michigan and lowa have eight losses combined, and even Ohio State—which likely will get an at-large BCS bid—could have done better if not for a ridiculous share plan at quarterback the

first month of the

season.

A. Big 12. Texas is the most complete team in the nation ... wait, wasn't the same thing said about Oklahoma last year before USC tossed around the Sooners in the Orange Bowl? Look, it's not like the Longhorns have been tested in this dog conference. I'm going under the assumption that Texas is just that good and everyone it plays is completely overmatched. Texas Tech has had a nice season; everyone else ... yeeesh.

5. Pac-10. USC is at 33 in a row despite sleepwalking through last week's win over Fresno State. UCLA is better than it showed against Arizona, and one-loss Oregon is getting lost in the BCS at-large talk. After those three, it's Big East 'ugly.

6. Mountain West.

TCU has had a fantastic season; the Frogs are



HAYES' 6 PICKS

Texas 56
Texas A&M 14
And Fran thought he had it tough at Alabama.

West Virginia 27 Pittsburgh 17

Pittsburgh 17
Pat White is the next
great spread option QB.

Florida 16 Florida State 13

Meyer will have beaten rivals Tennessee, Georgia and FSU. Notre Dame 35 Stanford 17

Welcome back to the BCS, Irish.

Kentucky 33 Tennessee 31

Vandy and Kentucky in the same season? Why not? Virginia Tech 30 North Carolina 17

This one may be tougher than the 'Noles next week.

speedreads

It's time to get rid of the penalty for celebrating in college football-or at the very least, adjust it. The ridiculous rule cost Vanderbilt a chance to beat Florida, and it nearly cost Ohio State in its victory at Michigan. There's no need for the choreographed stuff, but there shouldn't be a problem with a little jukin' and jivin'.

Do me a favor-watch the Senior Bowl. There you will see Washington State tailback Jerome Harrison, who leads the nation in rushing yards and had four 200-yard games this season. Some NFL team is going to love this speedy fire hydrant.

the quietest 10-1 team in the nation. Take Utah, BYU, Colorado State and New Mexico-all bowl-eligible teams -throw them in a locker room and switch uniforms, and I guarantee you couldn't tell who's who.

7. Big East. OK, there's West Virginia. And West Virginia. And West ... you get the picture. A quick tip for Louisville: Win a big game when it matters, then come talk to me.

8. Mid-American. This conference took a step back this season, but Bowling Green and Toledo have enough to scare the bejesus out of BCS heavyweights.

9. Conference USA. C-USA has fewer bad teams than the WAC. Congrats, fellas.

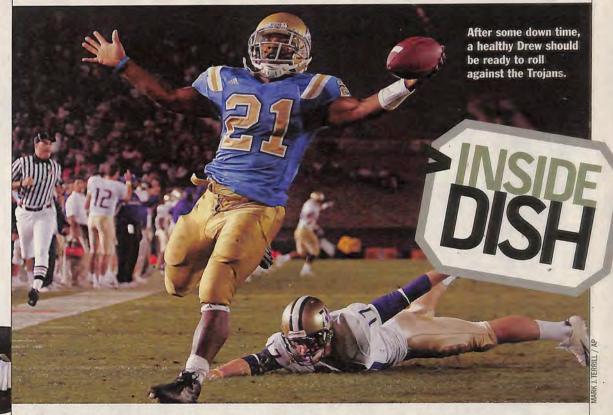
10. WAC. Fresno State, Boise State and seven bad teams.

11. Sun Belt. The league champ (Louisiana-Monroe) is 5-5. There may be 10 or more I-AA teams that

could win this conference. TSN

It looks as though the BCS will have its best bowl lineup yet as long as conference favorites (USC, Texas, Virginia Tech, West Virginia) don't get upset. Ohio State likely locked up one of two at-large bids last Saturday when it beat Michigan while Alabama and Miami lost. Notre Dame will secure the other bid with a win at Stanford on Saturday. The probable BCS breakdown: Rose (USC-Texas), Fiesta (Notre Dame-Ohio State), Orange (Virginia Tech-Penn State) and Sugar (LSU or Georgia-West Virginia). Pac-10 officials will try to pressure the Fiesta to take one-loss Oregon over the Buckeyes, and the Orange and Fiesta could swap Penn State and Ohio State to keep the Buckeyes from playing in the Fiesta for the third time in four seasons. ➤ Look for a staff shakeup at Michigan State, which lost six of its last seven games. Spartans coach John L. Smith started his tenure at State in 2003 with a 7-1 record, but his teams are just 11-16 since, including a 7-13 mark in Big Ten games. Smith has three years and \$3.2 million left on his contract, and that's too much for the school to eat. Defensive coordinator Chris Smeland and special teams coach Jim McElwain, two of Smith's confidents from their days together in Louisville, are under pressure because of their units' poor play. The special teams have been atrocious; the Spartans had a punt blocked that was

recovered for a touchdown last week against Penn State and also missed a short field-goal attempt-a 10-point turn in a 31-22 loss. ➤ Wyoming began the season with high hopes and four wins in its first five games. Twenty-five turnovers later-yep, 25-the Cowboys have finished off one of the biggest coliapses in the nation with a loss to San Diego State, their sixth straight defeat. There's no better indicator of a team's success than turnover ratio. Last year, Wyoming won seven games and was 19th in the nation with a plus-7 ratio. This season, the Cowboys rank 112th with a negative-12. ≥ Oujetly and efficiently, offensive coordinator Galen Hall has worked his way into the lead pack of eventual replacements for Joe Paterno at Penn State. Who knows when Paterno will retire, but Hall's work with a once anemic offense-and his successful history as a head coach at Florida (40-18-1 in six seasons)-will be hard to overlook. > There's not a more confounding team than Virginia, which has been loading up on elite recruits for several years but continues to struggle in big games. The Cavaliers are 36-25 under coach Al Groh, including a 2-9 record against the ACC elite of Florida State, Miami and Virginia Tech. Groh recently signed a contract extension that will pay him \$1.7 million a year through 2010. Now how does last week's 52-14 home loss to the Hokies look?



One key factor for UCLA in its December 3 matchup with USC: Two consecutive weeks off will allow RB Maurice Drew to get healthy. Drew hasn't been the same since spraining his knee last month against Stanford. He has gone three straight games without reaching 100 yards rushing but said last week that he finally feels free of pain. The Bruins have zero chance of beating USC without a big game from Drew, who one AFC scout says will be the fastest player on the field-including Trojans RB Reggie Bush.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

TSN's 125

TV (all times Eastern) Rk. Team (last week) W-L Next up 4:30 p.m., ABC 1. USC (1) 11-0 UCLA, 12/3 Over/under: 60 points and 1,000 yards. And that's just for the Trojans. at Texas A&M, 11/25 Noon, ABC 2. Texas (2) 10-0 The Longhorns can't lose this one, can they? No, really, can they?! 2:30 p.m., CBS 3. LSU (4) 9-1 Arkansas, 11/25 Auburn? Check, Alabama? Check, Arkie? Please. 4. Penn State (5) 10-1 TBD A Big Ten title but no Rose Bowl ... poor JoePa must be so confused. 8 p.m., ABC 5. Notre Dame (6) 8-2 at Stanford, 11/26 What, doesn't every two-loss team get to play in a BCS game? 6. Virginia Tech (7) 9-1 North Carolina, 11/26 7:45 p.m., ESPN So much for that Miami hangover. TBD 7. Auburn (9) 9-2 Playing the best ball in the SEC but aced out of the league title game. It's a mini version of 2004. 8. Ohio State (10) 9-2 Ain't it something how a little ol' win at Michigan can soothe what ails you? 9. Miami (3) 8-2 Virginia, 11/26 3:30 p.m., ABC Just how in the hell do you hammer the Hokies then lose to a team the Hokies annihilated, 51-7? 10. Oregon (11) 10-1 Chuck Weis 'n' JoePa have owned the coaching headlines, but how 'bout that Bellotti cat? 11. Georgia (-) 8-2 at Georgia Tech, 11/26 8 p.m., ABC How scary does Saturday night in Hotlanta suddenly look? at USC, 12/3 12. UCLA (12) 4:30 p.m., ABC 9-1 The Bruins think they can win. No, they know they can win. And they are horribly mistaken.

Wrangler

PLAYER OF THE WEEK

RB Reggie Bush, USC



Bush's explosiveness is well-known, but he took it to a new level against Fresno State, accounting for a Pac-10 record 513 all-purpose vards and two touchdowns as the Trojans held on for a 50-42 win. Bush did a good chunk of his damage in the decisive third quarter, when he had two touchdown runs of more than 40 yards and set up another score with a 35-yard gallop.

Hear from TSN's Player of the Week on The Tim Brando Show, weekdays from 3-6 p.m. ET on Sporting News Radio, or at radio.sportingnews.com.

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12.5 Tennessee Made you look.

'LITTLE GUYS'

1. Fresno State (8-2)

3. Central Florida (8-3)

4. Boise State (8-3)

2. TCU (10-1)

5. UTEP (8-2)

STORY LINES

- · 1. Trojans bend but don't break
- 2. Canes bend and keep bending 2. "They got all the bounces."
- 3. Nittany Lions break the tape
- 4. Buckeyes break the Big House
- 5. Sooners flat-out robbed

EXCUSES

- 1. "We came out flat."
- 3. "Too many injuries."
- 4. "We were cramping."
- 5. "Corso picked us."



USC. It's called defense. You're running out of time to get to

Miami. Remember back when the Canes could, like, block? Steve Spurrier. Beating Florida was for you. What happened to beating Clemson for your new peeps?

The refs in Lubbock. Is it too late to call the CSI guys? The Vols. Knoxville is Pat Summitt's town anyway.

Views from the student section at sportingnews.com

From Matt Singer, Michigan Daily

The Game, Maize and Blue, Scarlet and Grey. Hatred. History. Heroes. Howard, Woodson. Heisman.

Those who stay will be champions. Woody-Bo. Tressel-Carr. Sweater-vest. Big Ten's best. Scandal. Sanctions? (Should be.) Smith, Clarett.

Chilling cold. Classic football. Fiercest rivalry. Rockin' the Big House. Rushing the field. Rioting (only in Columbus).

Returners. Ginn. Breaston. Backbreakers, Bands, Dotting the "i" (Michigan invented it). Degrees-who wants one from OSU?

Anticipation. Desperation. Frustration. Elation. All across the nation.

Winged helmets, Buckeye stickers; "Go Blue" banner, take a shower (Ohio

Sleepless nights. Barroom fights. Bragging rights. Prestige, passion, pride. OSU 25, Michigan 21.



TIM BRANDO 3-and-out

NCAA.probation, the Reuben Houston case and Chan Gailey's future dominated Georgia Tech's preparation for the Miami game. Maybe we all should have that many distractions. It clearly was Gailev's biggest win with the Yellow Jackets.



I'll be outraged if Reggie Bush does not win the Heisman, but will it take a perfect performance to beat USC? No. Crosstown rival UCLA must be salivating after seeing Fresno State hang 42 points on the Trojans' defense. I predict a bearhug—an upset for the Bruins.

Expect the Capital One Bowl to select the two-loss Auburn Tigers rather than the loser of the SEC championship game. Ohio State will get the nod in the Fiesta Bowl over one-loss Oregon, which should make for some secret-room mayhem on Selection Sunday.

HEISMAN WATCH

1. Vince Young, Texas 3,188 combined passing-rushing yards, 30 combined TDs. 2. Reggie Bush, USC 2,338 all-purpose yards, 16 TDs. 3. Matt Leinart, USC 3,217 passing yards, 24 TDs. 4. Brady Quinn, Notre Dame 3,201 passing yards, 29 TDs. 5. Drew Olson, UCLA 2,909 passing yards, 30 TDs.

Spread the word

West Virginia won't pass up the chance to run from a formation designed to air it out By Tom Dienhart

o tight end, one running back, four receivers. What would Bear Bryant and Woody Hayes think of the spread offense? The thought makes West Virginia coach Rich Rodriguez laugh.

"I bet they would say, 'What do you mean run the ball out of the shotgun?' " Rodriguez says. "You'd probably have to convince them for three days."

It might take only three minutes because Rodriguez doesn't run a typical "finesse" spread—West Virginia prefers to run rather than dink and dunk. It's like taking a Ferrari on an off-road course.

So you're thinking, *Big East, big offense—big deal*. But the evidence doesn't lie: West Virginia led the Big East in rushing each of the past three years and leads it again this season with an average of 236.8 yards per game—good for eighth in the nation.

West Virginia has plenty of wins to go with its stats; it has claimed a share of the past two Big East titles and a third is in its sights. The Mountaineers are 8-1 and poised to play in their first BCS bowl game. All that's left is a Thanksgiving date with Pitt in the "Backyard Brawl," the world's best-kept secret rivalry, and a matchup with South Florida.

What makes this year's edition of West Virginia unique is that a redshirt freshman, Pat White, is the starting quarterback and a true freshman, Steve Slaton, is the workhorse in this one-back attack. But it all comes back to Rodriguez, who has an instructional tape on sale about running from the spread and has been dubbed "the father of the running spread."

"That and 5 cents won't get you a cup of coffee,"



Slaton's 94.1 rushing yards per game has helped the Mountaineers get into position for a BCS berth.

he says. Maybe not, but his attack has attracted a lot of interest. About 40 college staffs have visited to learn about Rodriguez's version of the spread since he arrived in Morgantown in 2001. Where do you think Northwestern got the idea for its neat-o offense?

The X-factor in Rodriguez's scheme is calling runs and run reads for the quarterback from the shotgun. The offense rarely huddles and focuses on setting the tempo and tinkering to keep the defense off-balance.

"We're still spread, but sometimes we'll use two backs or some tight ends; we use a lot of different personnel groups with the same philosophy in mind," Rodriguez says.

Somewhere, Bear and Woody have to be smiling—at least a little.

Sacking the field

Louisville defensive end Elvis Dumervil has spent so much time in opponents' backfields this season that it's amazing his teammates haven't mistaken him for the opposing quarterback. Dumervil opened the season by setting the NCAA single-game record with six sacks against Kentucky. And he has more history within his grasp—relatively speaking, as NCAA sack records have been official only since 2000.

-Shawn Reid

Single season

Name, School, Year	Sacks
Terrell Suggs, Arizona State, 2002	24
Elvis Dumervil, Louisville, 2005	20
Dwight Freeney, Syracuse, 2001	171/2
Dave Ball, UCLA, 2003	16½
Kenechi Udeze, USC, 2003	16½
D.D. Acholonu, Washington State, 2003	161/2

Career

Name, School, Years	Sacks	
Terrell Suggs, Arizona State, 2000-02		44
Jason Babin, Western Michigan, 2000-03	3	8
David Pollack, Georgia, 2001-04	36	
Shaun Phillips, Purdue, 2000-03	331	12
Elvis Dumervil, Louisville, 2002-05	32	

Sp and a shape of the shape of

Elvis leaves lots of quarterbacks you know what's coming—all shook up.

SCOUTS VIEWS

Observations from college coaches

USC tailback LenDale White is a big, bruising, powerful guy who is hard to bring down. They list him at 225 pounds, but he looks bigger to me. He cuts off his blocks well and brings great power inside. ... The problem with stopping Navy is not that their personnel is great. Quarterback Lamar Owens is a steady player, but they do such a good job executing what they need to do on the option. If one person is out of place, they're out of the gate. ... Alabama's defense is using a three-man front, and they can line up against any formation. That's not always the case with three-man lines. Remember, defensive coordinator Joe Kines has been around forever. Alabama also runs the ball really well, and senior quarterback Brodie Croyle is really sharp. Their offensive line is getting better every week. They blocked LSU pretty well.

... Texas has taken on quarterback Vince Young's personality. He wills people to win and has been like that since high school. You watch him in pregame and he's calling out the chants. He goes up to guys and pats them on the butt. He has a rah-rah attitude, and these guys respond to him.

... Virginia running back Wali Lundy is a heck of a player. He's got size, good feet and speed. He's a complete back. He's the one that jumps out at you on that offense.

... Ohio State tailback Antonio Pittman is tough, has great vision and finds the hole. He's surrounded by a lot of good people, too. When you're complemented well and have balance, it opens everything up. That has helped him this year. ... Missouri QB Brad Smith seems more at home in the Tigers' new spread option offense. He's not the most accurate passer, but he's decent enough. But when you have to deal with the option and his running out of the pocket, he doesn't have to be too sharp. His running takes a defense's aggressiveness away. So if he misses a throw on first down, he doesn't have as much pressure on him because he still can make it up with his legs on the next two plays. ... Notre Dame QB Brady Quinn has all the tools, but he's a little too streaky. In some games, he doesn't play quite as well as he can. If he can make the same jump from this year to next year that he made from last year to this year, he'll be a very good player. The thing that scares me about him on the next level is that sometimes players who have struggled and then get better with a new coach revert when they leave that coach. He won't be able to bring Charlie Weis with him. So, what happens when he has a new coach?

Steve Smith is great at getting to the ball—and he's even better after he catches it.

If this guy isn't an MVP contender, he should be

s part of his game-day routine, Panthers receiver Steve Smith watches video of the defender he expects to cover him, looking for revealing information. Three and a half hours before Carolina played Minnesota at Bank of America Stadium on October 30, he noticed something about Vikings cornerback Fred Smoot. Some of Smoot's interceptions came on plays in which he undercut receivers' routes.

Smith relayed this information to quarterback Jake Delhomme before they went on the field to warm up. "If you're throwing me a deep route," said Smith, "overthrow me, and let me go get it."

With 5½ minutes left in the first half, the Panthers faced first down at their 30. Smith, lined up wide to the left, ran a go pattern down the sideline. He sprinted past Smoot after about 30 yards and caught Delhomme's long pass over his shoulder before stumbling and getting shoved out of bounds at the 1. The 69-yard reception was one of 11 catches, for 201 yards, Smith made in a game Carolina won, 38-13.

That was the fourth victory in a six-game winning streak that ended Sunday with a 13-3 loss to Chicago. But the Panthers are 7-3 and tied with Tampa Bay for first place in the NFC South, and the biggest role in Carolina's climb has been played by a guy who is several inches short of qualifying for a Tip Toppers Club card.

Smith is 5-9, 185 pounds, but he has put up some giant numbers. He leads the league's receivers in

receptions (72), yards (1,106) and touchdowns (nine). Before Sunday's game, Smith was second in the league in big-play catches (25 or more yards) and second in receptions for first downs, according to STATS Inc.

A little more than 14 months after breaking his left fibula in the 2004 opener, Smith looks like the surefire comeback player of the year. I'll go further than that. I say he's a candidate for Teague MVP.

"He's gotten good. No, he's gotten great," Bengals wide receiver Chad Johnson says. "He is, in my eyes, the most dangerous receiver right now as far as being able to touch the ball and go the distance."

Smith is good at getting to the ball. He's even better once it's in his hands. As Bucs defensive coordinator Monte Kiffin points out, Smith can take a 5-yard hitch and turn it into a 75-yard play because of his quickness, elusiveness and ability to run through tackles. More than 50 percent of Smith's receiving yards have come after his catches, and he led the NFL in YAC (yards after catch) through Week 10.

"He's basically a running back when he gets his hands on the ball," says Bucs cornerback Brian Kelly.

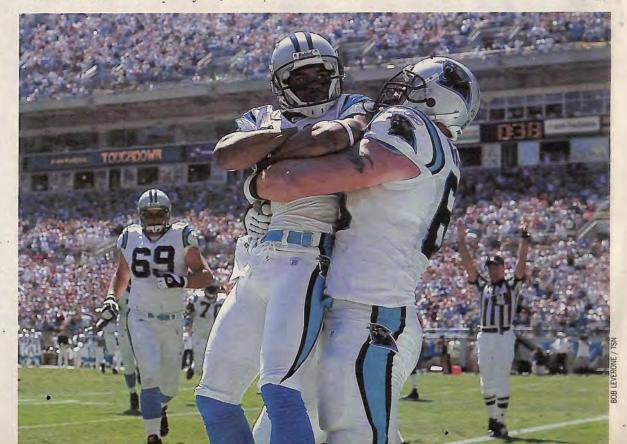
Smith, 26, has evolved into such a threat that his name usually is the first one mentioned by opposing defensive coordinators when they address their players before games against Carolina. An abridged scouting report on Smith:

Has excellent quickness and speed. Rarely gets caught from behind

Leap to the E L I T E

Jake Delhomme's favorite receiver would be a popular addition to other NFL huddles. The Sporting News polled quarterbacks around the league, asking them: Which opposing wide receiver would you like to have on your team? Steve Smith received 7 of the 58 votes cast, second to Marvin Harrison's 12. It's-an indication Smith might make the Pro Bowl for the first time as a receiver. He went to Hawaii as a return man after the 2001 season.

Marvin Harrison, Colts	(12)
Steve Smith, Panthers	(7)
Chad Johnson, Bengals	(6)
Randy Moss, Raiders	(6)
Hines Ward, Steelers	(5)



■ Has made a striking improvement in his route running since becoming a starter in 2002.

Gets separation on defenders because he doesn't lose speed going into or coming out of his cuts.

Has tremendous balance and body control. His 40-inch vertical leap allows him to outwrestle taller opponents for jump balls.

Runs low to the ground. Changes directions quickly. Has a stout build, which makes him difficult to bring down.

The Panthers move Smith around to try to create the best matchups. He plays both flanker and split end. He lines up wide or in the slot or goes in motion.

Opponents counter with a variety of ploys, often doubling Smith with a cornerback-safety or a linebacker-defensive back combination. In Week 3, Miami put 6-3, 248-pound linebacker Junior Seau in Smith's face and had cornerback Sam Madison line up 5 yards behind Seau. "That matchup was a little bit out of my weight class," Smith admits.

When teams spend great effort trying to stop Smith, it gives Keary Colbert and Ricky Proehl—the Panthers' No. 2 and No. 3 wide receivers—opportunities to make plays. Or it opens up Carolina's two-headed running attack featuring Stephen Davis and DeShaun Foster.

A third-round selection in the 2001 draft—10 wide receivers were picked ahead of him, including Cincinnati's Johnson—Smith made an instant impression in the NFL. He returned the opening kickoff 93 yards for a touchdown in the Panthers' 2001 opener at Minnesota.

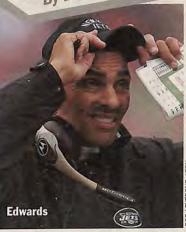
He's best known for his 69-yard touchdown reception on the first play of second overtime, giving the Panthers a playoff victory in St. Louis during their run to Super Bowl 38. Less than two years later, he has evolved into a top-tier player.

. "Without question, he's one of the top four or five receivers in the game right now," says Kelly.

Smith has been noticing other players for quite a while. Now, the attention is being reciprocated. TSN

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INSIDE DISSE By Dan Pompei .



There is fire behind the smoke about

Herm Edwards' not wanting to coach
the Jets after this season. Sources who
know Edwards well say the coach
wouldn't mind an escape from New
York. The environment there has
been tough on Edwards and his

family, and he might be happier in a less pressurized city. ➤ Rams coach Mike Martz continues to recover from endocarditis and vows to return to work January 2, the day after the regular season ends. He remains in regular contact with interim coach Joe Vitt. After the Rams' loss to the Seahawks, Martz addressed the team at Rams Park, telling his players not to lose heart. He pointed out that in 2001, the season the Patriots beat the Rams in Super Bowl 36, the Patriots started out 3-4. Martz also

attended a practice late last week. The Patriots are hoping to offset the loss of injured C Dan Koppen by getting back LT Matt Light sometime in December. Light's presence could be a big boost for the Patriots during the stretch run. With Light back in the lineup, the Patriots would be able to move rookie Nick Kaczur to right tackle, strengthening two positions and lightening the load on fill-in C Russ Hochstein. If the tackles can handle their responsibilities with less double-team help, the interior linemen would be able to help each other more. The Panthers' defensive MVP has not been LE Julius Peppers, MLB Dan Morgan or FS Mike Minter. It has not been RE Mike Rucker, although he probably is runner-up. Their defensive MVP has been CB Ken Lucas, a free agent the team picked up from Seattle last March. Many questioned the Panthers for giving Lucas \$37 million over six years, but he is playing the best football of his life. His cover skills have enabled the Panthers to blitz more. His run support has given them some freedom with their safeties. And his ability to handle one side of the field

without much assistance has enabled them to give more help to CB Chris Gamble. Ravens LT Jonathan Ogden long held the unofficial title of the NFL's Best Offensive Lineman. Not anymore. Ogden, 31, appears to be showing signs of age, according to scouts. The fact he never has been overly concerned about lifting and conditioning finally could be catching up with him. Ogden's play began to fall off a bit last year, and he has been somewhat inconsistent this season. He still is one of the better blockers in the game, however. The aftereffects of Hurricane Katrina still are blowing the Saints'

Hurricane Katrina still are blowing the Saints'

passing game off course. QB **Aaron Brooks** and several of his
receivers have found it difficult to deal with the distractions the hurricane still is
causing. The offense has lacked on-field leadership and focus. The result has
been receivers who run the wrong routes and drop too many passes, plus there

have been communication issues and a lack of synchronization.

LEET DICKSON / ISN

Ogden

speedreads

Adrian Wilson (24) doesn't get a lot notoriety, in part because he plays for Arizona. But he caught my attention during the Cardinals' 38-28 win over the Rams. The fifth-year strong safety had eight tackles, three sacks—including one that knocked Rams QB Marc Bulger out of the game—a forced fumble and a fumble recovery.



Lovie Smith deserves strong consideration for coach of the year because of the job he is doing in Chicago. On Sunday, the Bears beat Carolina, a team many considered to be the best in the NFC, 13-3. The victory improved their record to 7-3 and extended their winning streak to six games. An excellent young defense has made the difference for the Bears, and defense is Smith's forte.

From the department of mind-boggling statistics: Of the Panthers' 295 rushing plays this season, only one has exceeded 20 yards, and that came in the opener.

The Colts survived a shootout with Cincinnati to go 10-0, but I still don't think they'll run the table. Something—an injury, a flat performance—will derail their run at a perfect regular season.

NFL

TROY AIKMAN

Coaches would take more gambles if they didn't face intense scrutiny

My hat's off to Dick Vermeil and Jon Gruden for going for the win rather than the tie in recent games. Both coaches gambled and won, knowing that if their backs had been stuffed at the goal line, they would have been skewered. That's why you almost never see coaches do what they did.

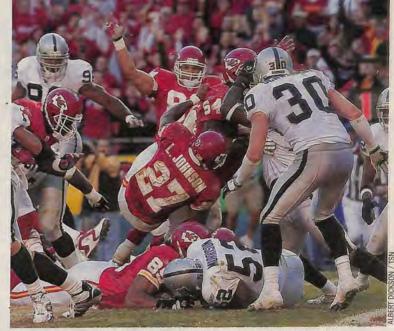
The conventional wisdom is to kick the extra point or field goal and tie the game, then go to overtime. But whenever coaches buck conventional wisdom, they face intense scrutiny from reporters and fans. Few coaches have any appetite for that. So they take their chances in overtime, and if it doesn't work out, well, at least their strategy doesn't get criticized.

Players don't see it that way. They'd go for the win every time. It's just one play, and players always think they can execute one play. I've never heard a player blast a coach for going for it in any situation. Remember the 1995 Cowboys-Eagles game when Barry Switzer went for the first down on fourth-and-1 at the Dallas 29? We came up short, and the Eagles took over and won the game on a field goal moments later. Switzer got blistered in the press, but there wasn't a player in our locker room who disagreed with his decision. Not one.

Now that I'm off the field, I can view these

decisions more . objectively. My rule of thumb is if you have the superior team, don't risk the game on one play. The better team should prevail over the course of several plays, so overtime is the way to go. But if you have the lesser team, you don't want overtime. You might not be able to win 20 plays, but anybody can win one play, so you might as well roll the dice.

Of course, situations are different. I questioned Gruden's call at the time because even if Mike Alstott had scored, there still would have been almost a minute left. He was risking the game on one play, but the Redskins had two chances to win—by stopping the 2-point attempt or by driving for a winning field goal in the final minute. Fortunately for the Bucs, Washington failed on both counts.



Vermeil was rewarded for his big risk with a game-winning touchdown.

Vermeil, on the other hand, went for the win on the last play of regulation. It was risky, but at least when Larry Johnson scored, the game was over.

One thing was certain for both coaches: It would've been ugly had they come up short.

The Troy Aikman show airs at 5 p.m. ET every Thursday through the Super Bowl on Sporting News Radio.

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AFC EAST

BUFFALO BILLS

CB Terrence McGee has received extra attention from opponents who have tried to avoid Nate Clements on the other side, and he has responded to the challenge. At 5-9, McGee lacks great size, which hurts him against big receivers. But he's a feisty defender with good ball skills and anticipation. He also is one of the team's most physical tacklers in run support. ... FS Rashad Baker continues to impress the team with his ability to make plays. Baker is smart and instinctive and has good range and ball skills. He plays mostly in the dime package, but his work ethic and attention to detail in film study have allowed him to step in as a starter at times. PROBLEM SPOT: The run defense has not improved. The Bills have had particular problems against zone blocking teams. Defenders are overcommitting toward the play side, which creates cutback lanes in the vacated spaces. The defense must do a better job of being disruptive and keeping blockers from getting to linebackers. Unless the run defense improves, the secondary will be vulnerable to play-action passes. -Allen Wilson



NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

C Dan Koppen (shoulder) is out for the season, but Russ Hochstein should perform fine. Hochstein isn't overly quick or athletic but is powerful and coachable. He is making the line calls now, so look for defenses to give him different looks. ... RB Heath Evans has proved to be a nice fill-in for Corey Dillon (ankle, calf). Evans has a stocky build yet changes directions well. His combination of power and balance means he rarely goes down at initial contact. ... TE Ben Watson is developing into a go-to receiver, making some tough catches lately. He has elite speed and power for a tight end, and Watson now is making the correct postsnap reads in an intricate passing offense. PROBLEM SPOT: The pass defense has been startlingly bad-20 touchdown passes allowed. The secondary has received most of the blame, but don't overlook the lack of a pass rush. Mike Vrabel has moved inside, so he isn't rushing the quarterback as much. OLB Willie McGinest, 33, is slowing down. It might help to play speedy OLB Chad Brown more. -Tom Curran

MIAMI DOLPHINS

Sackup QB Sage Rosehfels has nice touch on his throws and adequate arm strength, but his mediocre start against the Browns (5-of-10, 14 yards, two interceptions) made it clear the team must look elsewhere for its quarterback of the future. The Dolphins figure to search the college ranks for an answer. USC's Matt Leinart and Vanderbilt's Jay Cutler are the most intriguing seniors, but the Dolphins hope juniors Brady Quinn of Notre Dame and Vince Young of Texas will enter the draft and provide more options. ... Wes Welker has done a good job of turning himself into a reliable receiver and remains a good punt returner. However, his kickoff return ability has faded. He runs hard but doesn't have enough elusiveness to avoid big hits and isn't strong enough to break tackles. PROBLEM SPOT: The Dolphins must upgrade at cornerback. Sam Madison, 31, has lost recovery speed and no longer can jump patterns as well as he did early in his career. Rookie Travis Danlels is solid but probably never will make a lot of interceptions because he doesn't have enough quickness to close on the ball. The team hopes Will Poole, who is missing this season with a knee injury, will recover enough to compete for a starting job next year. — Jason Cole

NEW YORK JETS

CB Ty Law is struggling to adapt to the crackdown on illegal contact. Law, who has been flagged for nine penalties, is a physical corner who relies on using contact to redirect receivers on their routes. Law says he's being unfairly singled out by officials. To his credit, he still shows a terrific nose for the ball and has five interceptions. ... C Pete Kendall has settled down over the past three games. Kendall is an intelligent player who can diagnose defensive fronts and make the proper line calls. He's undersized (6-5, 280), but he compensates by playing with terrific leverage. He also knows how to play the angles. But he's not nearly as athletic as the previous center, Kevin Mawae. PROBLEM SPOT: The team has been outscored in the first quarter, 68-7, which is an indictment of its preparation. The biggest problem is turnovers, mostly by quarterbacks. The Jets have used five quarterbacks this season, so it's hard to assign too much blame to the coaching staff. —Rich Cimini



AFC NORTH

BALTIMORE RAVENS

RB Chester Taylor is taking carries away from Jamal Lewis. Taylor doesn't have Lewis' power but is more elusive and decisive. This could be an audition; both are potential free agents. ... OLB Adalius Thomas is playing as well as anyone on the team. He isn't spectacular but is steady. Thomas' forte is stopping the run, and he also has improved against the pass. ... The team would like to use WR Mark Clayton's big-play potential now that he's healthy. Look for the Ravens to try to get him in one-on-one situations by throwing him quick passes in the flat or dump-offs in the middle. PROBLEM SPOT: The secondary has left too many receivers open, the result of having commication breakdowns or being physically overmatched. The Ravens got away with it against Steelers QB Tommy Maddox but won't this Sunday against Bengals QB Carson Palmer. Teams are isolating nickel back Deion Sanders with underneath stuff. The safeties have been slow to react, and the corners don't seem to know when they have help. —Mike Preston

CINCINNATI BENGALS

LT Levi Jones enhanced his already stellar reputation as a pass blocker by not allowing a sack to Colts star RE Dwight Freeney. Jones is tough and is battling a strained left knee. He is quick off the ball, moves well laterally and gets a good punch. Jones excels at riding pass rushers wide as QB Carson Palmer steps up in the pocket. ... The defense is getting hurt by no-huddle offenses. The inability to make the proper substitutions forces'the defense to stay in one scheme and causes mismatches. The Bengals are particularly vulnerable against athletic tight ends. PROBLEM SPOT: The coverage units have been solid, but the kicking, punting and return games have been average at best. K Shayne Graham has improved his kickoffs, but he misses some fieldgoal attempts he shouldn't because of lapses in concentration. P Kyle Larson still needs to learn how to use the sideline as an extra defender. KR Tab Perry hasn't had a breakout game yet, but it is coming. He is big'and strong and has good vision. -Chick Ludwig

CLEVELAND BROWNS

QB Charlie Frye is mobile, resourceful and more instinctive than last year's rookie project, QB Luke McCown. The team should let Frye get his feet wet in the final month of the season. It would cost this losing, building team little to find out about him—even though starter QB Trent Dilfer has made it clear he doesn't like an in-game rotation system. ... LT LJ. Shelton plays hard and is a good fun blocker, but he lacks the perimeter quickness to deal with blind-side speed rushers. The Browns have had to adjust game plans to give Shelton help, limiting an offense that needs extra options. PROBLEM SPOT: The Browns' pass rush is ineffective. There are no monsters among the front seven. DL Orpheus Roye, Jason Fisk and Alvin McKinley never have been better-than-average rushers. Opponents recognize that OLB Chaun Thompson is the front seven's top athlete and thwart him with blocking schemes. Notable improvement is unlikely until coach Romeo Crennel's system develops and better talent is added. —Steve Doerschuk

PITTSBURGH STEELERS

QB Ben Roethlisberger likely will return to the lineup against the Colts while backup Charlie Batch (broken hand) is expected to-miss at least two more games. Roethlisberger's mobility—which the team doesn't expect to be significantly affected by knee surgery—makes a dramatic difference in the offense. It forces other teams to back off the line and creates more space for the running game. ... FS Chris Hope gets overlooked playing alongside Pro Bowl SS Troy Polamalu, but Hope has more tackles than Polamalu. Hope is fast and powerfully built and hits like a linebacker. He and Polamalu form one of the toughest safety tandems in the NFL. PROBLEM SPOT: The defense needs more production from the linebackers, who have just two interceptions and two fumble recoveries in 10 games. Injuries are partly to blame, but veteran OLB Joey Porter needs to be more effective. He hasn't been as disruptive as the coaches would like. The defense could get a boost this

week from the expected return of Pro Bowl ILB James Farrior (knee). - Gerry Dulac



Lessons learned in a big Indy win

Three lessons learned from the Colts' 45-37 victory over Cincinnati . that could have big implications on Indy's road ahead:

- 1. The Peyton Manning-led offense can adapt to any situation and remain potent. When opposing defenses have played zone coverage to limit big plays in the passing game, Manning has remained patient and leaned heavily on running back Edgerrin James. When teams crowd the line, Manning can air it out. In the first half Sunday, he passed for 272 yards and three touchdowns.
- 2. Big receivers present problems for the Colts' undersized corners,

Jason David and Nick Harper. The Bengals' 6-1 Chad Johnson (eight catches, 189 yards, one TD) continually exposed holes in the secondary, and 6-4 Chris Henry got loose for a 15-yard touchdown on a post pattern. Both climbed over the top of the Colts' corners, who found themselves defenseless at times.

3. Though the Colts' defense still is vulnerable to big running plays and has been gouged in the passing game lately, it is vastly improved from last season. The big difference is its ability to make a few critical plays each game. Against the Bengals it stopped a key fourth-and-1 run, rookie cornerback Marlin Jackson nabbed his first career interception and end Robert Mathis had his 10th sack. —*Mike Chappell and Chick Ludwig*

HUMMER LIKE NOTHING ELSE.

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ROOKIE OF THE MONTH LIKE NO ONE ELSE



Shawne **Merriman**

"Lights Out"
has shone brightly

When the Chargers drafted Shawne Merriman, they hoped he would live up to his nickname, "Lights Out." He hasn't disappointed them.

Merriman plays as both a defensive end and outside linebacker, and quarterbacks better make sure they know where he is. Merriman leads the team with seven sacks and has contributed several other big plays.

He produced five tackles and a sack against the Eagles in Week 7 and had two sacks and a forced fumble in a victory over the Chiefs a week later. He also led the team with nine tackles and a sack in a Week 9 win over the Jets, then put up two more sacks in last week's rout of the Bills.

His versatility and big-play potential have helped the Chargers stay in playoff contention with a 6–4 record. "Lights Out" has shone in the last month, and his future is unquestionably bright.

NFL

The rookie with the freakish talent has opened a universe of possibilities for the Jaguars' offense By Bart Hubbuch

Where

The Jaguars may not have a dynamic offense, but they are causing defensive opponents to fret, work overtime in the tape room and sometimes reach a hair-ripping level of frustration—all because of the Slash-like versatility and special skills of rookie Matt Jones.

Is he in the slot? Split wide? Running a reverse? Lining up at quarterback?

"I love to keep people guessing, and a guy like Matt Jones can let you do that," offensive coordinator Carl Smith says, smiling.

The Jaguars drew some criticism last spring for making the former Arkansas quarterback the 21st overall pick, but the negative commentary has died down.

Jones has proved to be such a quick study at wide receiver—and such a fearsome weapon with his freakish combination of size (6-6, 229), speed (4.3) and reliable hands—that he leads all rookies with 27 catches. "The sky's the limit," Smith says.

Where's Matt Jones? Find him in three plays that have defensive coordinators looking for answers.

OPTION ROUTE FROM THE SLOT

Although it's nothing flashy, this has become the Jaguars' go-to play with Jones when they're not inside the red zone.

Working mostly in a three-receiver set with quarterback Byron Leftwich in the shotgun, the Jaguars line up Jones in the slot on the right side. Jones runs an option route based on the down and distance and whether he has a big size advantage against the defender.

CROSSING **≺**·

If the situation is, for example, a third down early in the game, Jones will run a medium crossing route or a 10- to 15-yard out. But if the Jaguars need a big gain or Jones sees a glaring mismatch, he will run a seam

The deep seam route resulted in a 32-yard touchdown pass in a Week 10 win over the Ravens.

SEAM ↑
OUT



work

Even Carmen Sandiego would be hard-pressed to track Jones in Jacksonville's offense.

OPTION/COUNTER

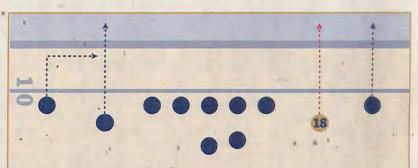
This is where the Jaguars get creative with Jones and make use of his speed and his experience as a college quarterback.

Using a two-tight end, one-back set, the Jaguars initially line up Jones in the left slot. He then shifts to quarterback as Byron Leftwich (7) moves to a receiver position on the right side.

Jones takes a shotgun snap and either runs a counter play with the running back as his lead blocker or an option play with the back ready to take a pitch.

Although opponents are starting to catch on to this trick, it has proved effective. Jones has rushed four times for 19 yards—a 4.8 average—on the counter.





THE BASKETBALL FORMATION

The Jaguars use this set primarily in the red zone to take advantage of the height of Jones and two other receivers: 6-4 Ernest Wilford and 6-4 Reggie Williams.

Jones usually lines up in the right slot. All three receivers (and sometimes four when 6-1 Jimmy Smith is included) run fade routes to the end zone, giving Leftwich the option of throwing to the receiver he senses has the most separation.

This play worked for a 10-yard touchdown catch by Jones—his first in the NFL—in a Week 6 win at Pittsburgh and for a key 7-yard TD last Sunday in a victory at Tennessee.

AFC SOUTH

HOUSTON TEXANS

Zach Wiegert returned to the starting lineup at a new position, right tackle, because Victor Riley played well after moving from right tackle to right guard, Wiegert's old position. Wiegert hasn't played tackle since 2002, but he has better quickness and mobility than Riley. ... CB Lewis Sanders has become the starting nickel back with Demarcus Faggins (hamstring) out. The team likes Sanders' size (6-1, 210) and speed, and he forced a fumble in his first start, against the Colts. ... LT Chester Pitts, who held Colts RE Dwight Freeney without a sack in two games, has improved because he has learned to keep his hands inside the player he is blocking, which gives him better control. PROBLEM SPOT: The offense is moving the ball more efficiently in the running and passing games, but it still isn't creating big plays. The team needs to use speedy WRs Andre Johnson and Jerome Mathis to stretch the field, and they must hang on to the ball when they are open downfield. WR Derick Armstrong also could be an option; he is reliable and doesn't attract much attention from defenses because of Johnson and Mathis. - Megan Manfull

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

WR Reggle Wayne continues to show why he's a premier player. He plays bigger than his size (6-0, 198), has perhaps the best hands on the team and is a big threat after the catch. He has improved his production every season. ... TE Dallas Clark is emerging as a big-play threat. He is dominating matchups against linebackers and is effective as the slot receiver in two-tight end sets. ... MLB Gary Brackett is undersized (5-11, 235) but can hold his own in run support. His best assets are his speed and athleticism, which are ideal for his coverage responsibilities in coordinator Ron Meeks' zone schemes. PROBLEM SPOT: The pass defense surrendered the ninth-fewest passing yards in the league through the first nine games, but there are concerns about the health and consistency of the secondary—especially after the Bengals put up 328 passing yards. CB Jason David and SS Mike Doss have struggled in coverage. David's play has tapered off after a strong start, and he has given up too many plays over the top. Doss is a big hitter, but his aggressiveness works against him in coverage. FS Bob Sanders has battled a variety of injuries, and the team needs him to be at full efficiency heading into the playoffs. —Mike Chappell

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

RB Fred Taylor can't seem to escape his injury-prone reputation. He left Sunday's game against the Titans with a thigh bruise and already was nursing a bruised ankle. Taylor, 29, remains dangerous when healthy, but his constant breakdowns are speeding up the team's transition to second-year RB Greg Jones. Jones doesn't have Taylor's moves, but he's a lot more reliable. ... The Jaguars picked off another pass against the Titans, giving them 15 for the season and putting them on pace to smash the team record of 19 set in 1999. Much of the credit goes to improved coverage schemes designed by new secondary coach Dave Campo and the additions of CBs Kenny Wright and Terry Cousin.

PROBLEM SPOT: The special teams coverage units continue to be a constant source of trouble. They have given up several returns of 70 or more yards. The Jaguars simply don't have enough experienced players on special teams. Things might get even worse now that S Nick Sorensen, the team's top special teams cover man, is out the rest of the season with a broken ankle. —Bart Hubbuch

TENNESSEE TITANS

OLB Keith Bulluck is on pace to lead the team in tackles for the fourth straight year, but he'd like to make more impact plays in games down the stretch. Bulluck is a great athlete whose best attribute is his range and solid tackling; he rarely misses a tackle. Although he isn't necessarily known for blowing guys up, he's great at wrapping up ballcarriers. He's also an effective blitzer and is solid in coverage. ... The Titans

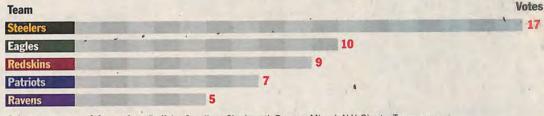


ulluck

say they'd like to get RB Travis Henry involved down the stretch to help them make a decision on his long-term status (he's due a big bonus next spring), but in the last three weeks he has one carry for 2 yards. The Titans gave up a third-round pick for Henry in the offseason but don't seem to want to use him since his return from a four-game suspension. PROBLEM SPOT: The defense has been through so many players at the nickel spot it has caused communication problems in the secondary and resulted in big plays. Rookie S Vincent Fuller started the season as the nickel back but was lost to an ankle injury. Since then, CBs Andre Woolfolk, Michael Waddell and Rich Gardner have played the position. The team would like Woolfolk to finish the season as the nickel back, but he has been slowed by a hamstring injury. —Jim Wyatt

PLAYERPOLL

For those Terrible Towel-waving fans who think Pittsburgh should be the capital of Blitzburgh, well, now there's some proof. We polled 56 NFL quarterbacks, and 17 said the Steelers have the league's best blitz package. "They do all kinds of stuff to try and confuse you" one AFC quarterback says. "They walk guys around, and they send guys from different angles. They're tough."



Other teams receiving votes: Buffalo, Carolina, Cincinnati, Denver, Miami, N.Y. Giants, Tennessee.

The most exciting part of football is the sack.



AFC WEST

DENVER BRONCOS

WR Ashley Lelie still uses his top-end speed to run past defenders and displays the superb body control that made him one of the league's better deep threats over the past two years. As a result, his per-catch average is creeping up. But the coaching staff has been most pleased by his willingness to compete for the ball in the air and sacrifice his body over the middle. ... The Broncos are on pace to defend the fewest rushing attempts in a non-strike season in team history. The biggest reason they have been tested so infrequently has been their often substantial first half leads. Because of their speed at linebacker and physical play up front, the Broncos also have done a solid job of keeping teams bottled up.

PROBLEM SPOT: The team's kickoff return unit has been pedestrian all season. Rookie Darrent Williams is a natural punt returner who has only limited experience on kickoffs. To shake things up, the Broncos have replaced him with Roc Alexander, who handled kickoffs in college and has a better feel for the role. —Lee Rasizer

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

CB Dewayne Washington isn't the same caliber as CB Patrick Surtain (ankle), who likely will miss a couple of games, but he has played well as a fill-in this season and should be a solid replacement. But another injury at corner would pose a problem; CBs Benny Sapp and Dexter McCleon are best when they play nickel back and line up on slot receivers. ... RE Jared Allen doesn't have a blazing first step, but he runs well enough and knows how to use leverage so he plays bigger than his 265 pounds. Allen never quits on a play, so he gets some sacks on sheer effort. He is more consistent against the run than he was as a rookie last year. PROBLEM SPOT: Right tackle has been an unsettled position. Four players have started there, and none has played particularly well. Three of those players-Jordan Black, Chris Bober and John Welbourn-might be better suited to playing guard or center. Welbourn currently occupies right tackle, and the Chiefs should stick with him and hope they can build some continuity. Welbourn is not a great edge pass protector, but he is strong at the point of attack and in the running game. -Adam Teicher

OAKLAND RAIDERS

C Jake Grove (knee) regained his starting spot last week after missing most of the previous five games. Grove's return doesn't necessarily make the Raiders better, though it does free Adam Treu to concentrate on long snapping. ... DB Renaldo Hill has become one of the team's most reliable defenders because of his experience and solid instincts. He makes few mistakes and is an adept open-field tackler. ...

CB Charles Woodson's broken leg is healing well, and he could return to the field before the end of the season. If the team falls out of playoff contention, however, he might opt to stay on the sideline rather than risk further injury. PROBLEM SPOT: Injuries to the interior offensive line have made it difficult for RB LaMont Jordan to find holes because defenses have been overloading the weakened area. QB Kerry Collins also has been forced to rush too many throws, leading the team to maximize protection by sending out fewer receivers. Things should improve once LG Brad Badger (knee) and Grove are at full strength and the line regains its cohesiveness. -Steve Corkran

SAN DIEGO CHARGERS

NT Jamal Williams makes the run defense what it is-the best in the NFL. At almost 350 pounds, Williams draws double-teams on almost every snap. He can take away a blocker and also can get around blocks, which makes running backs alter their paths and often run right into linebackers. ... The secondary was outstanding in the victory over Buffalo. CB Drayton Florence, who returned after missing four games (ankle), was mostly effective against Bills WR Eric Moulds and re-established himself as the closest thing the Chargers have to a shutdown corner. PROBLEM SPOT: The kickoff coverage unit is going to cost the Chargers against a team that can capitalize on the field position it keeps yielding. K Nate Kaeding has a hip injury that affects his strength; his kickoffs aren't high or long. P Mike Scifres probably should be kicking off. Teams are consistently running away from leading special teams tackler Kassim

Osgood. And some key special teams players—Shaun Phillips, Stephen Cooper and Clinton Hart—have been playing more on defense because of injuries. —Kevin Acee

teams 5 yards got up, block s

Broncos FS John Lynch

Worst thing I've seen in a pileup: In a preseason game my rookie year, I was assigned to block Steve Tasker, the old special teams great, on a kickoff return, and I went and knocked him 5 yards in the air. I just crushed him. He never saw me coming. He got up, and he didn't care about where the ball was going. I went to block someone else and (Tasker) came and leveled me. And underneath that pile he grabbed where you don't want to be grabbed.

Most memorable slobberknocker: My favorite still is one on Barry Sanders. I believe it was in the playoffs in '97. It wasn't my best hit, but it's just the fact that no one hit Barry Sanders like that. Afterward, he told me that was the hardest he'd ever been hit.

Weekly dining tradition: My wife usually makes me some tuna and crackers on Saturdays. I don't know how that became our tradition, but it has. I get some canned tuna and crackers, go to work, watch some college football. This has been going on six, seven years now.

My day off: I've got a young son who wants to play football, and he doesn't just want to play catch—he wants to play tackle football. It's not

what you want to do on your off-day, but it's your son and when he gives you that look, it's like, "All right. Let's go."

Worst ride: Nick Ferguson's (1996 Chevy Tahoe). We call it the 1974 Chevy Tahoe. It's got the roll-down windows and the whole deal.



Courtyard by Marriott presents

WEEK 12 MATCHUP By War Room scouts

Clark runs excellent routes and gains separation in man-to-man coverage by beating linebackers and safeties with his combination of size (6-3, 252) and speed. He is adept at



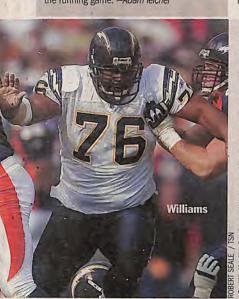
(6-3, 252) and speed. He is adept at gaining yards after the catch and stretching the middle of the field. Polamalu has the speed and range of a safety but the size (5-10, 212), strength and hitting ability of a linebacker, making him a versatile part of Pittsburgh's defense. He

has great instincts and a nose for the ball.

The Steelers like to drop one of their safeties into the box to support the run and use as an extra blitzer on nearly every play. When Polamalu is in the box, he'll match up against Clark in zone coverage, working in the flats where Clark will run his quick out routes. But when free safety Chris Hope drops into the box and Polamalu plays in the deep middle, it's a signal for Clark to run his seam route because Polamalu is not at his best in deep coverage.

Polamalu is frequently used as a blitzer, so it will be key for him to get to Peyton Manning quickly and keep Clark guessing as to what he'll do on each play. If Polamalu blitzes successfully, Clark will become a nonfactor in the passing game. But Manning is good at sniffing out the blitz, and if he sees it coming, he will hit Clark on a hot read for a big gain. **Advantage: Clark.**

More matchups: warroom.sportingnews.com



NFC EAST

DALLAS COWBOYS

Coach Bill Parcells has made it clear he's going to split the running load among three players. Julius Jones will be the feature back, getting 18 to 20 carries per game, but Marion Barber will get at least one series per half and some third-down plays. Barber has gained Parcells' respect and trust because he's a willing blocker, a punishing runner and a good receiver. The Cowboys would love to get Barber 10 carries per game and Tyson Thompson five. ... ILB Bradle James is having a breakout season. He is an explosive hitter and leads the team in tackles. In the past, he was robotic in pass coverage because he didn't understand the nuances of route combinations and how to function within the defense. But he has spent more time studying this season, and it has paid off. PROBLEM SPOT: The Cowboys have to get better production from their red zone offense. They like to give the ball to Barber inside the 20 because he's a more physical runner than Jones, who couldn't score on three straight runs from the 1 against the Lions. Barber had two touchdowns against Detroit and has five in the past three games. - Jean-Jacques Taylor

Casey Hampton is a stalwart at nose tackle. He's a Pro Bowler. He's a big, strong guy who's hard to move. That's important for the Steelers because it's tough for opponents to run on them and for offensive linemen to get to the second level and block their linebackers. ... None of the Rams' first-round defensive tackles-Damione Lewis, Ryan Pickett or Jimmy Kennedy—have lived up to expectations. All three of those guys are young and athletic. You'd think they would dominate more than they have. ... Arizona's Larry Fitzgerald is an extremely talented receiver with tons of potential. He's big, he has deceptive speed, and he basically can get open against any defensive back. ... Darrent Williams is still learning how to play corner, but he has the skills. He's got speed, he can jump, and I'm really impressed with his ability to play the ball in the air. And he's really done well as a punt returner for Denver. ... Frank Gore is a little bit underrated. Kevan Barlow carries

the load for San Francisco, but

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

QB Mike McMahon started in place of Donovan McNabb (sports hernia) against the Giants and played a strong second half after two rough quarters. McMahon has excellent mobility and has

played in several versions of the West Coast offense-both in college and with the Lions. He would get more opportunities if McNabb decided to have surgery and end his season. ... LB Justin Ena has taken LB Zeke Moreno's roster spot. Ena can fill in better as a backup in the middle and is just as good, if not better, on special teams. ... WR Billy McMullen has been promoted to slot receiver. His size (6-4, 210) is perfect for the position, and his confidence-which had



been waning—has increased as he has made plays downfield. **PROBLEM SPOT:** The offseason losses of DE **Derrick Burgess** and DT **Corey Simon** hurt the team's pass rush, and there has been no pressure from the inside—the defensive tackles haven't recorded a sack in six straight games. The play of rookie DE **Trent Cole** gives the team hope, but his speed off the edge does nothing to help in the middle. —*Mark Eckel*

NEW YORK GIANTS

RT Kareem McKenzie is a powerful run blocker and has been solid in pass protection, though his size (6-6, 327) makes him vulnerable against speed rushers coming off the edge. McKenzie has been called for too many penalties; the book on him when he signed in the offseason was he didn't often get called for penalties. ... CBs Curtis Deloatch and Corey Webster are showing their inexperience at times. Deloatch, whose play has slipped, had two pass-interference penalties in Sunday's win over the Eagles. Webster has been solid as the nickel back, but he allowed a long reception because he bit hard on a pump fake. PROBLEM SPOT: QB Eli Manning's inaccuracy is keeping a good passing game from being great. Before going 17-for-26 against the Eagles, he had completed 49.2 percent of his passes in the previous five games. Teams are doubling WR Plaxico Burress and _ TE Jeremy Shockey, and Manning hasn't checked down enough to other targets such as RB Tiki Barber and WR Amani Toomer. The passing game needs to move the chains and create big plays. -Ralph Vacchiano

WASHINGTON REDSKINS

With David Patten (knee) on injured reserve and James Thrash hobbled with a hamstring problem, Taylor Jacobs has a chance to step into the No. 2 wide receiver spot opposite Santana Moss. Jacobs has talent but lacks experience and confidence. The team might be forced to go with Rich Parson, recently activated from the practice squad, as the No. 3 receiver. That might keep the offense from using a lot of three-wideout sets. ... FS Sean Taylor needs to make better decisions on deep routes. Too often, he focuses on big-name receivers, leaving the middle open for other capable receivers. When the team is in a two-deep zone and Taylor shifts toward a premier receiver, it often leaves MLB Lemar Marshall covering a wide receiver-not a favorable matchup. PROBLEM SPOT: The once solid defense is faltering. Fundamental breakdowns in tackling have been an issue against the running game, and the secondary has been vulnerable against the passing game because the team's blitz packages are being neutralized. If the blitzers don't get to the quarterback, it leaves the other defensive backs and linebackers exposed. This has resulted in big plays and long drives late in games. -Paul Woody

SCOUTS VIEWS

Observations and opinions from two NFL scouts, one from each conference.



it's not a drop-off by any means when Gore comes in the game. He runs with strength and power, but he also can be elusive. ... It will be very difficult for Philadelphia to make a playoff run. It wasn't a good situation in their locker room with Terrell Owens, but he was a playmaker. As talented as Brian Westbrook is, he's not a pound-the-ball-control-the-clock guy game in and game out. And now they're without Donovan McNabb. ... The Panthers are probably the best team that isn't

getting a lot of recognition.

They very quietly have done a lot of good things.

... I think the Bucs can win

Bucs can win with **Chris Simms** at quarterback.

The kid clearly is talented in terms of throwing the ball. A lot of his development will depend on the coaching he gets and how he takes to the coaching.

NFC NORTH

CHICAGO BEARS

Though he prefers to play behind massive, two-gap defensive tackles, MLB Brian Urlacher has become comfortable taking on more blockers in the team's attacking, one-gap system. His legs are healthy, and he is making more plays at and behind the line of scrimmage. ... Rookie QB Kyle Orton has only eight turnovers in seven games since throwing five interceptions against the Bengals, and the team has won six straight games. Barring an Orton injury or meltdown, Rex Grossman, who has already participated in some 7-on-7 drills, will be a backup at least until the spring, when he will get a chance to reclaim his starting role. PROBLEM SPOT: The offense has relied on short passes and underneath routes since the Bengals game because coordinator Ron Turner is reluctant to let Orton throw downfield. The offense still is running the ball well, so there should be plenty of play-action opportunities, but Orton does not throw an accurate deep ball and is without primary speed threat Mark Bradley (torn ACL). Though Grossman is a better downfield passer, the team will stick with Orton and hope he can connect with WR Muhsin Muhammad and add a vertical element. -Brad Biggs

DETROIT LIONS

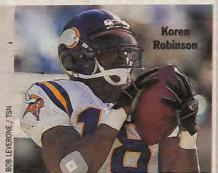
LB Teddy Lehman, who has missed three games with a foot injury, could be out for the season because it appears he needs surgery. Lehman had been the team's No. 1 backup at every linebacker position, and he was solid in nickel packages. Donte Curry, who takes over that role, is good against the run but doesn't have Lehman's pass-drop skills. Curry moves well laterally and rarely gets caught out of position, but he can get overpowered. ... The Lions missed CB Dre' Bly in the four games he was out with a wrist injury. Bly supplies energy and game-turning plays. When he went down, so did the intensity-and the turnovers. Bly has good speed and great instincts. He's not an aggressive tackler, but he doesn't shy from contact, either. PROBLEM SPOT: There isn't one facet of their game the . Lions can go to when they need yards. There's no muscle in the running game and no flair in the short passing game, and there's nothing at all when it comes to the deep game. The key players are healthy, but the Lions can't put together consistent drives, even with all their first-round talent in the lineup. The team must focus on getting one thing right and build from there, even this late in the season. -Tom Kowalski

GREEN BAY PACKERS

C Mike Flanagan, while playing through the pain of a sports hernia, has struggled against bigger nose tackles this season, but the Packers need him to play well and will do everything they can to re-sign him after the season. Now that backup C Scott Wells is the starter at left guard, the team doesn't have a lot of options at center. If Flanagan is injured or isn't re-signed, the Packers could be forced to start a rookie. ... Donald Driver has become the team's go-to receiver this season. He doesn't have great size (6-0, 192) or speed, but he's a perfect fit in the West Coast offense because he is fearless going over the middle and is an excellent route runner. He's best running slants and curls, where he can use his outstanding body control to create space. PROBLEM SPOT: The kickoff return game is putting pressure on an already struggling offense by failing to create good field position. WR Robert Ferguson (knee) and RB Najeh Davenport (ankle) were lost to injury, which forced the team to use third-string RB ReShard Lee, but the bigger issue is an ineffective scheme. -Tom Silverstein

MINNESOTA VIKINGS

Toniu Fonoti will replace benched G Chris Liwienski, who hasn't been the same since injuring his shoulder in training camp. Fonoti, who reported to the team at 404 pounds and still weighs more than the 350 he is listed at, moves his feet well for his size. If he can stay in shape, he can be a dominant drive blocker and make a difference in the running game. ... Coaches hope WR Koren Robinson, who was a big-play receiver for the Seahawks, can stretch opposing defenses because the team is without a deep threat. Robinson has been inconsistent and WRs Marcus Robinson and Travis Taylor are most effective in the intermediate passing game. PROBLEM SPOT: The team entered training camp with three solid options at running back, but none has panned out. Mewelde Moore and Moe Williams have been plagued by injuries; Michael Bennett ran for 106 yards in one game but otherwise averaged 2.1 yards per carry during the first nine games; tookie Ciatrick Fason still is developing. The position could be a high priority this offseason. —Kevin Seifert



Though he hasn't received much attention, Colorado State WR David Anderson may have the best hands in this year's class. Anderson plays faster than his 4.55 40 time, and be adjusts well to poorly thrown passes. He's undersized at 5-10, 194 but has the potential to be a reliable slot receiver. He projects as a Day 1 pick. ... Florida State DT Brodrick Bunkley is a hard-nosed trench warrior who plays with a mean streak. An effective run stuffer, he also can get into the backfield and pressure the quarterback. He needs to improve his speed, but if he tests well he could go fate in the second round. ... Clemson CB Tye Hill is a stud and should be a top 25 pick. At 5-10, 180, he's short for the position but has blistering 4.39 speed and is built like a rock. His playmaking ability and fast-paced playing style remind us of Titans CB Pacman Jones, but Hill has more discipline. ... Toledo QB Bruce Gradkowski's numbers have shrunk this season, but he still has proved to be a productive leader. Look for him to be a mid-Day 2 pick and a reliable By War Room scouts backup as a rookie. ... Wisconsin's Donovan Raiola is a pure center, with good size (6-2, 297) to play the position in the pros. He should be picked

early on Day 2 and could start as a rookie.

It's hard for opponents to elude Bunkley's grasp, no matter what position they play.

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BRIAN BALDINGER

How far the Bucs go will depend on Williams and Simms

After running for an unprecedented 434 yards in his first three NFL games, Bucs rookie Cadillac Williams rushed for only 82 in the next six games, two of which he missed with a foot injury. But when I studied those recent games on film last week, he didn't look like damaged goods. I figured that if the Bucs stuck with him, the magic would return.

Against Atlanta last Sunday, it did. Williams ran for 30 yards the first time he touched the ball and finished with 116 yards and a touchdown on 19

He looked terrific-a lot like LaDainian Tomlinson, in fact. When Williams finds his path blocked, he can jump-stop on two feet, make a lateral cut through the air to another hole, then burst through. Few runners besides L.T. can make that jump-stop move. Williams has great quickness and acceleration, and once he's through the hole he's very physical. He can run over defenders and carry them on his back. And he can catch passes.

The man throwing those passes, Chris Simms, isn't as dazzling as Cadillac, but he is emerging as a capable quarterback. He has led Tampa Bay from behind to win in the fourth quarter in each of the past two weeks, first against Washington, then against



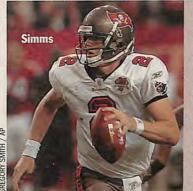
Williams left his recent problems in the dust by trampling the Falcons' defense.

Atlanta. Though he passed for only 118 yards Sunday, 35 came on the game-tying touchdown drive, when he was poised and confident.

Simms has made only six starts in 2½ seasons, so he still has a long way to go. He threw a bad interception in the fourth quarter but shook it off and produced the game-tying drive on the next possession. He appears to have the ability to erase a bad play. I like Simms' toughness and his touch on the deep ball, and I love his work ethic. Jon Gruden says Simms is the hardest-working quarterback he ever has had. He's a gym rat, one of those first-to-arrive, last-to-leave guys. He immerses himself in football

Simms hasn't played enough to provide an accurate read on his potential, but I do know this: The Bucs will go as far as Simms and Williams take them. Tampa Bay is tied for first place in the tough NFC South, and if they are to win the division and go anywhere in the playoffs, it will be because Simms and Williams play well.

Brian Baldinger, an offensive lineman for 12 NFL seasons, can be heard on Sporting News Radio and seen on FOX Sports, Listen online at radio.sportingnews.com.



NFC SOUTH

ATLANTA FALCONS

The pass rush has struggled since RE Brady Smith (toe) went down. His replacement, rookie Jonathan Babineaux, struggles against bigger tackles and is best suited to play inside. The defense has only one sack in three games since Smith was injured. He probably won't return until December 5 against the Panthers. ... CB DeAngelo Hall has great physical skills, but he needs to work harder and study more tape. Hall must learn his speed can't always bail him out. PROBLEM SPOT: The run defense has been poor because the Falcons haven't been fighting off blocks. Offenses have double-teamed DT Rod Coleman and occupied NTs Antwan Lake and Chad Lavalais long enough to open big holes in the



middle. SLB **Michael Boley** has struggled to beat tight ends' blocks and fill gaps, which makes it harder for MLB **Keith Brooking** and WLB **Demorrio Williams** to contain running backs, especially when they drop into coverage and then have to recover. —George Henry

CAROLINA PANTHERS

WLB Will Witherspoon, a potential free agent after 2005, has emerged as a difference-maker. He has the quickness to be a sideline-to-sideline run stopper and is equally valuable as a pass defender. He's excellent at dropping in coverage and has shown good hands and a knack for being near the ball. ... RE Mike Rucker dedicated himself to getting in better shape in the offseason. That has translated into more quickness, energy and sacks. ... WR Steve Smith has been terrific, but there's no other consistent offensive threat. Defenses can either focus on stopping Smith or let him get his catches and yards and shut down the other parts of the offense. The Bears used the latter approach successfully last Sunday. PROBLEM SPOT: The running game has struggled all season. The line has bleen excellent in short-vardage situations but needs to get better at opening holes on early downs. RBs Stephen Davis and DeShaun Foster also need to hit holes more quickly and accurately. Foster is the more explosive of the two, and the team needs to get him more carries. -Pat Yasinskas

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

TE Zachary Hilton is getting an opportunity to develop while starter Ernie Conwell (knee) is out. Hilton's receiving skills are more developed than his blocking skills. OB Aaron Brooks seems to be getting more comfortable throwing to Hilton. Conwell will be back before the end of the season; Hilton's role, though, should increase as time goes on. ... In a stacked group at defensive end, Will Smith is emerging as the Saints' top playmaker. He is fiery and quick. Smith (6-3, 282) probably will make Darren Howard expendable during the offseason. PROBLEM SPOT: The Saints can't seem to get the ball in the end zone. They have outgained their opponents by more than 200 yards this season, but they have been outscored by more than 100 points. There are many problems. The Saints are among the league leaders in turnovers and penalties, the biggest drive killers. And they have lacked continuity on offense because of injuries. The key will be for Brooks to regain confidence in the weapons the team has surrounded him with. -Mike Triplett *

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

QB Chris Simms' ability to get the ball downfield is beginning to change the offensive attack. The team still will use a ball-control passing approach, but Simms will throw deep more often. That should open up short and intermediate passes and improve the running game. ... Offseason knee surgery and a sore shoulder have cut into WR Michael Clayton's effectiveness. He isn't gaining separation or breaking tackles as well. ... CB Juran Bolden doesn't possess exceptional cover skills, but he gives the team an aggressive nickel corner who knocks receivers off their routes and plays well in a zone scheme. The team gains an edge when he plays corner and CB Ronde Barber plays in the slot. PROBLEM SPOT: The team's running game has been inconsistent because young linemen such as LT Anthony Davis, LG Dan Buenning and RG Sean Mahan are struggling with the way opponents play them. They got by on sheer aggressiveness early but now must develop better technique. The unit may have to make more use of zone blocking to get the production it needs. Despite the struggles, the team is unlikely to make a switch in personnel. —Roy Cummings



NFC WEST

ARIZONA CARDINALS

Since Antrel Rolle (knee) was hurt in Week 3, left corner has been a problem spot, and opponents are exploiting it; they have thrown at the left corner about 80 percent of the time. Robert Tate, who started on the left side most of the season, was benched in favor of rookie Eric Green, but Green hasn't played that well, either. The team also has tried Raymond Walls at the spot. ... The quarterback picture has been focused on Kurt Warner and Josh McCown, but second-year OB John Navarre might have the skills to be a solid starter.

He lacks touch and mobility but has a great arm, and coach Dennis Green says Navarre's intellect is comparable to Tom Brady's. If Warner struggles down the stretch, the team might look at Navarre.

PROBLEM SPOT: The team's tackling has been poor, and Green says it's a result of players' relying too much on the schemes to put them in position to



Green

make plays. But fundamentals are lacking. There have been too many arm tackles and attempts to knock ballcarriers out instead of wrapping them up. The team has increased the emphasis on tackling in practice; it looked better in last Sunday's victory at St. Louis. -Kent Somers

ST. LOUIS RAMS

It's apparent cornerback should be the top priority in the offseason. The Rams need a big corner who can neutralize tall wide receivers. Rookie CB Ron Bartell (6-1, 208) was picked on by the Cardinals in his first start. ... The Rams shouldn't rush QB Marc Bulger back from his latest shoulder injury, suffered last Sunday. It's clear the team is going nowhere, so it shouldn't put Bulger at risk of further damage. ... WR Kevin Curtis has played well enough to keep the starting job, even when WR Isaac Bruce is fully healthy. Curtis, who has elite speed, has shown the ability to get behind secondaries and outrun pursuit. His route running is improving, and he is a willing blocker. He needs to improve at making tough catches in traffic, PROBLEM SPOT: With the hope of reducing penalties, interim head coach Joe Vitt brought in two referees about a month ago to mohitor Rams practices and provide input. The strategy hasn't worked. The Rams have been flagged for 26 penalties over the past three games, many of which kept opponents' drives alive: Penalties are the result of poor technique and poor focus-and those responsibilities fall to the coach. -Jim Thomas

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

SS Tony Parrish (leg) is out for the year, so rookie Ben Emanuel will be the starter. Emanuel has good size (6-2, 213), but he lacks experience. Emanuel, who joined the team six weeks ago, has the speed to cover tight ends and backs, but he is physical, too-he has played linebacker in the team's dime package. ... WR Brandon Lloyd has shown more precision and decisiveness in his route running under receivers coach Jerry Sullivan and continues to emerge as San Francisco's go-to receiver. Lloyd has good speed, exceptional concentration and outstanding athletic ability, allowing him to make acrobatic catches. He also has tremendous leaping ability and has shown he can go up and over defensive backs. PROBLEM SPOT: The 49ers' tight ends have been a nonfactor in the passing game since starter Eric Johnson (foot) was lost for the season. Billy Bajema leads the unit with just four receptions. The team claimed Terry Jones off waivers from the Ravens to try to improve the experience and depth at the position. The 49ers hope Jones, who is a solid, physical blocker, can use his speed and instincts to get open down the middle or on the corners. - Dennis Georgatos

A new **Midway** attraction



The Bears may look for more ways to get the ball into playmaking CB Nathan Vasher's hands, possibly as a punt returner. Although he lacks ideal size (5-10, 180), and recovery speed for a corner, Vasher has tremendous ball skills; he originally was recruited to play wide receiver at Texas. He had two interceptions against Carolina last week, bringing his season total to six, and he had an NFLrecord 108-yard return on a missed field-goal attempt in Week 10. -Brad Biggs

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

The team is on pace for its most sacks since 1985. The pass rush has been aided by the addition of LE Bryce Fisher and rookie LBs Lofa Tatupu and Leroy Hill, who are explosive players and good blitzers. The four-man rotation at tackle also is a consistent source of pressure. Linebackers coach John Marshall took over the play-calling duties after coordinator Ray Rhodes had a mild stroke before the season. Marshall is more willing to call blitzes. ... WR Peter Warrick hasn't been a factor in the offense. He hasn't recovered from a knee injury and still runs with a hitch in his-stride. Warrick also hasn't mastered the Seahawks' playbook. ... RG Chris Gray started his 100th consecutive regular-season game last Sunday. Aside from being durable, he has good instincts and is tough. Gray doesn't have ideal bulk and isn't exceptionally quick, but he finds a way to get the job done. PROBLEM SPOT: The Seahawks have excelled at putting together long touchdown drives, but it's disconcerting to the coaches that they so often start with poor field position. A big culprit: penalties on punt and kickoff returns. Coach Mike Holmgren even has threatened offenders with fines, but the team had three more penalties on returns against the 49ers. -Clare Farnsworth

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	PA	253	210	196	227	161	179	170	184	, 152	170	262	292	169	202	214	229
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FEARLESS FORECAST

Chicago at Tampa Bay. Both teams will try to grind it out in a field-position battle, but home-field advantage and a slightly better passing game will make a difference for Jon Gruden's team against Lovie Smith's familiar schemes. Buccaneers 14, Bears 13.

New England at Kansas City. Although the Patriots' injury-riddled defense will give up big yardage and points at Arrowhead, Tom Brady will spread the ball around against a bad Chiefs pass defense. That will allow the visitors to steal a victory late. Patriots 31, Chiefs 27.

N.Y. Giants at Seattle. Eli Manning and the Giants' defense both play their best back East, and that spells trouble for them on a long trip out West. Expect Shaun Alexander's explosive running to carry the Seahawks again and for Manning's comeback attempt to be thwarted by an aggressive Seattle defense that thrives at home. Seahawks 27, Giants 20.

Pittsburgh at Indianapolis. The Steelers will try to make this a slow-tempo, physical game with smash-mouth running and hard-hitting defense. But eventually Peyton Manning's execution on downfield throws will be too much for Pittsburgh's overmatched secondary and limited passing game to overcome. Colts 27, Steelers 14. -Vinnie lyer

For in-depth analysis of every game, every week, subscribe to Pro Football War Room at warroom.sportingnews.com.



Field goals of 50 yards or more made by Arizona's Neil Rackers this season, including a 51-yarder Sunday against the Rams. That puts Rackers second on the NFL list, two behind Morten Andersen, who made eight field goals of 50-plus yards in 1995. Rackers is perfect on 31 field-goal attempts this season.



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	Pct.	.700	.700	.500	.400	.700	.444	.400	.222	.700	.700	.600	.200	.800	.400	.300	.200
02	PF	222	281	200	210	169	154	167	201	253	206	244	159	272	252	205	151
	PA	.164	184	201	232 •	110	228	193	184	179	183	206	266	187	300	268	290
Q	Div.	3-1	2-1	2-1	0-4	3-0	2-1	1-3	0-2	1-1.	1-1	1-1	1-1	5-0	1-4	2-3	1-2
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INSIDER DAVE D'ALESSANDRO

They're not undefeated anymore, but the Pistons have been the best team so far—and as title-worthy as anybody else in the field.

Pistons are even better without Brown

o it's a 1-point game last week, Detroit at Houston, and the thing that strikes you most is this: Everything the Pistons do in white-knuckle time just reeks of arrogance.

They throw it in to Rasheed Wallace on the left box, and he scores against overmatched Stromile Swift. At the other end, Ben Wallace pokes out Yao Ming's dribble to force a turnover.

Then, Take 2: Rasheed on the left block again, scoring against single coverage. Down the other way, Ben blocks Stro's jumper.

Finally, Take 3: Sheed in the post again (Memo to Jeff Van Gundy: Catch on yet?) for another shamelessly easy fadeaway on poor Stro. At the other end, Ben draws a charge against Yao and fouls him out.

Never mind that the Rockets had Detroit playing their tempo all night or that they were within one at the 4-minute mark. In just 120 seconds, the Wallaces took over, the lead went from one to eight and the Pistons had their eighth straight victory.

Almost every night this season, they've authored a game story such as this. It's almost as if the Pistons are toying with teams, but what they are going through, really, is a natural evolution:

Virtually all of their players are in their primes, and given their natural tendency toward unselfishness, the team is also in its prime.

Of course, the following night at Dallas, the Pistons celebrated the one-year anniversary of The Palace brawl by getting mugged in public, but that can happen to anyone. It just makes you feel sorry for the next team that has to play Detroit.

The bottom line—for most people, anyway—is this: "The way Flip Saunders has them playing, I think that they are all playing better," Celtics forward Paul Pierce says. "I think Larry Brown held them back."

That's the popular consensus, anyway, though it would be wrong to forget that Brown deserves some credit for this. Sfill, you see Pierce's point: Now that Brown has been permanently filed under "Life's Too Short," the Pistons are playing with a freedom, spirit and confidence they didn't really show before.

"That has everything to do with Flip's system," Chauncey Billups confirms.

That system better not require more than five guys, though, because the bench has been stupefyingly bad, except for Maurice Evans, who finally is getting a Ben
Wallace and the Pistons operate with smash-mouth efficiency.

chance and making the most of it.

Antonio McDyess is rebounding well but shooting horribly. Carlos Delfino hasn't done much to merit a crack at the rotation. Darko Milicic still is used for mop-up and little else. Dale Davis has assumed the Elden Campbell role of Shaq Hacker-in-Waiting.

But you win with five, and that

As for the best in the West ...

Gregg Popovich is Larry Brown's best friend, but he has no desire to follow his mate's example by taking on, a reclamation project for the sake of a challenge.

The money's nice, and there is always satisfaction in having willing pupils, but challenges? Phooey.

Pop told the San Antonio Express-News last week that his current job probably will be his last because rebuilding isn't his idea of a good time and Tim Duncan can't play forever.

Whether he was just talking out loud, nobody knows. At any rate:

"I'm smart enough not to ever get into that situation," Popovich said, referring to Brown's move to New York. "My moon is aligned very

Popovich won't go this way or that way he'll stay in San Antonio until he retires. closely with Timmy's. I'm waiting for his retirement announcement because mine will be 30 seconds after it."

Keep in mind that this is the game's straightest shooter. Pop is one coach who doesn't need to satisfy his ego by trying this with another group in another place.

"I have no need to prove this, that or the other by going to this, that or the other city," Popovich said. Then, mimicking the ubiquitous coaching experts, he added, "'Oh, he did it again—so he's for real!' For real can kiss my ass."

Why not? Everyone else has by now. Keep in mind, this guy is really one fluky Derek Fisher heave from going after his fourth straight title, and nobody is betting against him as long as Duncan is upright. That's a tough act to beat.



seems to be all the Pistons need.

Go station to station with this team and you'll find that only Big Ben can be regarded as one of the top five at his position. You can easily name eight or nine power forwards better than Rasheed. You can count seven or eight better small forwards than Tayshaun Prince. You can name seven or eight more accomplished shooting guards than Rip Hamilton. And you can name five or six better point guards than Chauncey Billups, though you'd have to use your imagination to do that, and he's as clutch as any of them.

Not a single star among them. But with every list you make, you have to include a Piston somewhere in the top eight or nine at every position. It's really about how the pieces fit, and that's the beauty of this Detroit team, if you can ever apply such an adjective to these battle-scarred brutes. Dismiss their title chances at your own peril. TSN

8

Check out the latest news, stats and standings at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

Now that the Kevin Garnett trade watch has begun, let's reiterate the only ground rule: You cannot trade the game's most talented big man for anything but another talented big, or at least a stud in the works. So the first place Kevin McHale should call is Orlando, which has the right piece (Dwight Howard), the draft pick and the salary number (Grant Hill) to make it add up.

Is there any more obvious front-runner for Defensive Player of the Year than Marcus Camby? Entering the week, he was leading the league in rebounds and was second in blocked shots. He also was averaging 34.5 minutes, cementing his stature as Denver's only indispensable player.

The early leader for Most Improved Player is **DeSagana Diop**. After four crummy years in Cleveland, the Mavs' \$6 million investment has made a major impact—most recently, a 16-board, six-block game against the Nuggets.

INSIPE

You might have overlooked it, but Magic PF Dwight Howard did something not even Timberwolves PF Kevin Garnett or Suns PF Amare Stoudemire accomplished as precocious teens. At 19 years and 342 days old, Howard

• became the first player in history to record a 20-20 before turning 20 (21 points and 20 rebounds, to be exact, against Charlotte). The youngest before that was G/F John Drew, age 20 years and 47 days, back in 1974. ➤ Rockets

G David Wesley reached an interesting milestone a few weeks back. His career points total reached 11,080, which surpassed that of G John Starks, making Wesley the second-highest scorer in NBA history among players who weren't drafted.

bench, which is something he'll have to get used to in Miami. No,

he's not particularly happy about it. > Wizards G Antonio Daniels,

He won't reach No. 1—that distinction belongs to **Moses Malone** (27,409), who was an ABA draftee.

➤ Belated congrats to C **Dennis Rodman**, who secured part-time employment last week with the Cedar Valley (lowa) Jaguars of the IBL. His contract calls for two games in late May. ➤ For the first time in 487 games, F **Antoine Walker** came off the

Carrying the burden in the middle for the Pacers has taken a toll on O'Neal.

on teammate PG Gilbert Arenas: "I
tell people all the time that
Gilbert is probably the
third-best player that I've
played with, (behind) Tim
Duncan and David
Robinson—period. That's a

pretty bold statement because I've played with some pretty good players: Ray Allen, Rasheed Wallace.

(Arenas) is a beast."

➤ Sometimes, the members of the media get the blame even when they don't do anything. Lakers

coach Phil Jackson now says he didn't seriously entertain thoughts of taking the Knicks job last summer because the writers in New York are "snakes." > Keep an eye on Pacers F/C Jermaine O'Neal this season because the demands of playing center are taking a toll (two sprained ankles, a popped blood vessel in his left hand). With C Jeff Foster at least a week away from returning from his Achilles' problem, O'Neal still has some punishment ahead. > Rev up the Rivalry Machine: Celtics SF Paul Pierce has decided Pistons SF Tayshaun Prince is an "overrated defender," one who is effective only because he has shot blockers behind him. > The major snag with G/F Latrell Sprewell? He wants a two-year contract, and nobody is offering him more than one year. Orlando was the most recent team to give him the thumbs-down. The other snag is that he's 35, and for a guy whose entire game is legs, he looks every month of his age. > The great Joey

Crawford officiated his 2,000th game

November 11 in his hometown of Philadelphia.

Only four others (Jake O'Donnell, Dick

Bavetta, Earl Strom and Tommy Nunez)
have reached the milestone. > John
Stockton no longer is a Jazz employee,
so he was under no obligation to reach
out, but he had rookie PG Deron Williams
stay at his home in Spokane, Wash., a week
before camp began for what can be described
as a private minicamp.

Kings SF Peja Stojakovic, who is likely to be the big prize of next summer's free-agent market, apparently is in no rush to leave Sacramento. A rumor that he wants a trade to Chicago was denied by agent David Bauman, who added that they haven't even discussed Stojakovic's impending free-agent status for two months.



By Sean Deveney

First, there was cheering, the frenzy of a home crowd watching its team cut a 21-point deficit to near single digits in the fourth quarter. Then there was a side pick-and-roll, with Bucks forward Joe Smith screening Timberwolves defenders Kevin Garnett and Sam Cassell and freeing room for rookie point guard T.J. Ford to burst to the basket. Then there was Timberwolves center Mark Madsen, 70 pounds heavier than Ford, sliding over on defense. Then Ford jumping into Madsen. Ford losing his feet. Ford crashing to the court like an anvil, motionless.

Then there was quiet, For Ford, there was a familiar numbness in his back and neck. Fifteen feet away, seated on press row, a visiting scout, well-aware of Ford's history of back problems, noted, "The Bucks' worst nightmare."

That was February 24, 2004. Skip ahead to last week, 21 months later. The Bucks are leading Golden State by 12 with 4:14 to go in the third quarter. Ford gets the ball on a rebound, zips past Baron Davis into the lane and flings a bounce pass to Michael Redd beyond the 3-point line. As Redd knocks in the shot, Ford tumbles headlong, hitting the floor and the basket stanchion.

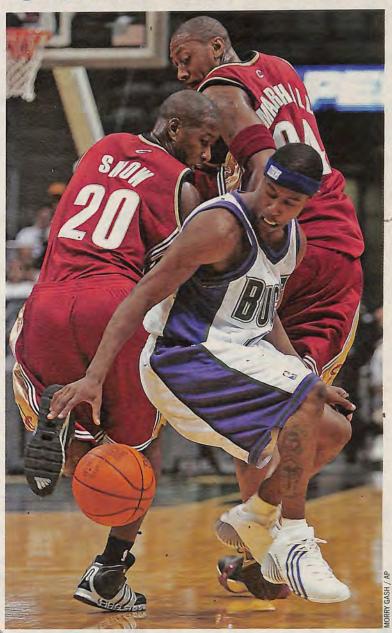
There's that nightmare again. For anyone who saw Ford's terrible fall, who watched Ford carried out on a stretcher, he is forever fragile. But this time, Ford quickly pops up, pumps his fist, and just like that, the nightmare passes.

"I know I could get hurt," Ford says. "But I can't play like I'm afraid of that. I have no more chance of getting hurt than anyone else."

The nearly two years between the '04 fall and Ford's return to the court have been difficult, for both Ford and the Bucks. Ford has a congenital condition-he learned about it in 2001-called spinal stenosis, a narrowing of the spine that pressures the spinal cord. He had surgery in May 2004, followed by monthly MRIs. Ford admits he worried he never would play again but tried to stay with the team anyway. The stress of not being able to play was too much, though, and the Bucks sent him home to Houston last January.

Meanwhile, the team struggled through what should have been

BUCKING CONVENTION



Boosted by T.J. FORD's return from a career-threatening injury, Milwaukee is winning with a rare combination of size, shooting and—most important—speed

Ford's second season. Milwaukee, which was 29-26 with Ford in 2003-04, was 30-52 without him last season.

"He's the key to the whole thing for us," Smith says. "He puts pressure on the other team. When he is on the floor, you have to have your wheels on."

Thanks to Ford, the Bucks' wheels are firmly on. Milwaukee entered the week with a 5-3 record. The team overhauled its roster, with a new coach (Terry Stotts) and four new starters, including Ford. Milwaukee drafted big man Andrew Bogut first overall, gave a maximum-dollar contract to Redd, then added free-agent forward Bobby Simmons and traded for center Jamaal Magloire. It's a young group—the starting five has an average age of 24.

Those young legs are on the move. The Bucks installed an uptempo approach that has allowed ... the team to average 101.9 points. Milwaukee has been wreaking havoc by pairing Ford with last season's point guard, Mo Williams, in a lethally quick backcourt. The presence of Magloire and Bogut, with Smith and Dan Gadzuric coming off the bench, allows the Bucks to play fast without yielding size and rebounding. Perhaps the biggest beneficiary has been Redd. Surrounded by such a potent group, he is getting better shots, hitting 47.1 percent from the field and averaging 25.4 points.

"They're a tough team to contend with," says one scout. "They shoot so well, but most teams that do that give up size. They don't. They don't give up speed, either, because T.J. Ford has enough speed for everyone. He's the quickest guy in the league."

And he knows how to win. Ford led Willowridge High to consecutive Texas state championships as a 'junior and senior, with a 75-1 record. He was 48-19 in two years at Texas—including his one-plus year with the Bucks, Ford has a .762 winning percentage over five-plus years.

Sure, just being on the court after such a nightmarish fall is a victory for Ford, who is second in the league with 9.3 assists per game. But he has more victories in mind. "The injury is behind me," Ford says.

"We've got a good team here, and we should be able to win a lot more games than people think."

INSIDER LEE SPENCER Ispencer@sportingnews.com

Rick Hendrick has his health and a lot of optimism going into 2006.

The fall and rise of the Hendrick dynasty

rom the outside, everything looked fine nine years ago at Hendrick Motorsports.
The organization had just clinched the second of four consecutive titles—Terry Labonte was preparing to be feted in New York, and Jeff Gordon was the runner-up. The organization was on track to becoming a dynasty.

But Rick Hendrick had a secret one that he would keep until after the banquet. Hendrick had cancer. Only Hendrick, his family and his doctors knew the struggle that lay ahead.

Fast-forward to 2005, the year after Hendrick lost a son, a brother, two nieces and several close friends in a plane crash. A dynasty? Jeff Gordon, the longtime face of Hendrick Motorsports, didn't qualify for the Chase. The No. 48 car made it, but the relationship between driver Jimmie Johnson and crew chief Chad Knaus was strained at times, and a crash at Homestead cost Johnson any chance at the championship. Rookie Kyle Busch, Labonte's replacement, won two

races but stalked out of the postrace interview after his second victory. Second-year driver Brian Vickers improved dramatically, but he's still not where the organization expected. And the Busch series program that won the title two years ago failed miserably.

Racing runs in cycles. The fall race at Martinsville in 2004—the day of the plane crash—was the lowest low for Hendrick, and now both he and his organization are on the upswing. Hendrick credits the depth and continuity of his organization with helping his teams rally after the crash.

"You kind of have a template in place over the years," he said. "You might change the names and people, but having guys who have worked together for 10 or 15 years sure helps. You can go out and get stars, but can they work together? That's the key to being a successful organization."

Hendrick has an incredible knack for identifying talent and potential among his personnel. He's known for cultivating young mechanics and offering opportunities for advancement throughout the organization.

Steve Letarte, who started with Hendrick while in high school, was promoted to crew chief for Gordon in September. The pair won their first race together and scored four top 10s, including three top fives, in the final five races as Gordon



Hendrick had plenty of celebrations this season—such as Johnson's victory in the Coca-Cola 600—but season's end brought only determination for next year.

speedreads

If Todd Bodine had started the season in the No. 30 Germain Motor Co. Tundra, it's quite possible Toyota would have scored its first Craftsman Truck Series title. Bodine, who replaced Chad Chaffin in June after his No. 66 team shut down, had a series-high five wins and finished third overall, 73 points behind Ted Musgrave.

Chip Ganassi has upened the checkbook to upgrade his organization's pit crews. The challenge now will be to get all the parties working together successfully.

Because Bobby Labonte is coming on board, the atmosphere surrounding the No. 43 Petty Enterprises team is the most positive it has been since The King was in the car more than a decade ago.



climbed to an 11th-place points finish—and a \$1 million bonus.

The Nos. 5 and 25 teams didn't rise to the level of the 24 and the 48, but both made significant strides under engineer Brian Whitesell and brilliant, young crew chiefs Alan Gustafson and Lance McGrew. It's no surprise that Hendrick is convinced all four teams will qualify for the Chase in 2006.

And despite not winning a title and having but one team in the Chase this year, Hendrick hardly can complain. His cars won the Daytona 500 and nine other races.

"We've got our momentum back," he says.

DISIDE DISH

Nextel Cup team owners are

furious with NASCAR for getting rid of the impound procedure, especially because it was put into place as a cost-saving measure. The recently rescinded list of impound races for 2006 was released to teams in September, and the teams had planned to cut back on hotel rooms and personnel needed to haul equipment. Impound races reduced wear on cars and made qualifying packages—engines, gears, transmissions and special fuels—unnecessary. But the tracks that held impound races lost out on concessions sales and the networks lost

programming inventory—and those are the prevailing

programming inventory—and those are the prevailing interests. > Dodge has been at a disadvantage, especially on the intermediate tracks, since teams began to race the new Charger in February, so Ryan Newman and Kasey Kahne drove Intrepids at Homestead. NASCAR president Mike Helton said it had no problem with the change because the Intrepid is an approved Cup car. Newman qualified second and finished seventh; Kahne qualified third and finished 16th. Specifications for the Charger were developed before NASCAR made rules changes affecting spoilers and tires. > Kahne was able to work

Kenny Francis last weekend as Evernham Motorsports got a

with new crew chief

head start on its 2006 organizational setup. Jeremy Mayfield will work with crew chief-engineer Chris Andrews. > Dave Blaney will drive the No. 22 for Bill Davis Racing next season, replacing Scott Wimmer. Blaney says a decision has not been made on a crew chief, but he's content to have Derrick Finley remain in that position. > Sterling Marlin, who enjoys driving heavy equipment in his spare time, drove a garbage truck into the garage for the news conference introducing his new sponsor, Waste Management. Marlin, who will race for MB2 in 2006, ended his eight-year Ganassi Racing tenure with a 26th-place finish at Homestead. ➤ Teams looking to get around NASCAR's new tire lease program might want to rethink that idea. Goodyear's Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology-a computer chip embedded in tires' sidewalls-made its debut at Homestead. NASCAR is limiting the number of tires teams can have at tracks for racing and testing. The chip allows Goodyear to know which

by NASCAR.

Blaney is OK
with his
new team
maintaining
the leadership

status quo.

tires are going where so teams

can't use current tires for

tests-beyond the five

ABOI D HINSON FOR



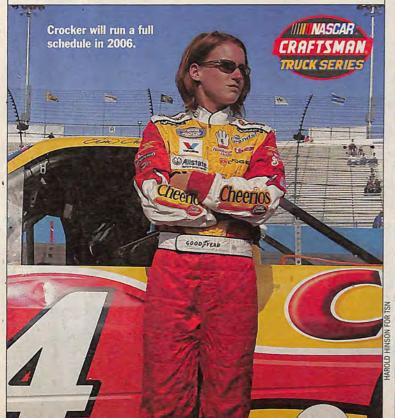
Dale Earnhardt Jr. is a lock for the Chase for NASCAR Nextel Cup in 2006. Earnhardt, NASCAR's most popular driver, struggled mightily without the services of crew chief tony Eury Jr. for most of 2005, but the two showed signs they're back on the same page after reuniting late in the season. Earnhardt's new role as a team owner is the first apparent sign, other than his driving, that he's starting to fill his father's shoes off the track. He also has learned patience, and that has helped him appreciate the business side of the sport more than ever. Junior is embracing his racing pedigree.

HAROLD HINSON FOR TSN

TRUCKS DISH

Ted Musgrave, who finally won his first NASCAR championship, says he has a lifelong contract with Ultra Motorsports. But what type of truck will he drive in 2006? Dodge is pulling some of its support from the series, and owner Jim Smith has not said publicly what manufacturer the team will be affiliated with. Ford appears to be the top candidate. > Todd Bodine has found a home in the Craftsman Truck Series with Germain Racing. Bodine battled in the Cup series as a supersub when top teams needed a fill-in, but he never could latch on to a top-tier ride. Now he has made a name for himself in the No. 30 Toyota. He won five races this season and has won seven in his trucks career. Bodine is a lock for the 2006 trucks title. > Erin Crocker, who will run the full schedule next year, made her trucks debut at

Phoenix. Crocker, 24, qualified 22nd and finished 36th-last. ➤ Wood Brothers' new trucks program will make its debut at Daytona. Bobby East will drive the No. 21, and Marcus Ambrose will drive the No. 20. Both drivers will have to pass rookie tests before they're allowed to compete. > Former Goody's Dash racer Justin Hobgood is pulling double duty in the No. 9 Toyota. In addition to driving, he's a fabricator for Germain Racing during the week. > Though the number of trucks races Mark Martin will drive in 2006 is uncertain, the number that will be on the truck is certain: 6. Kevin Harvick Racing graciously released the number, which Martin uses in the Cup series, to Roush Racing. KHR will field the No. 33. > Expect rookie Aric Almirola to have a full-time ride with Chevrolet next season. The only hitch is Almirola, 21, is under contract to Joe Gibbs Racing, which doesn't have a trucks team. > GM Racing locked up its sixth manufacturers



title.



RACKSIDE SERVICES: Nº2

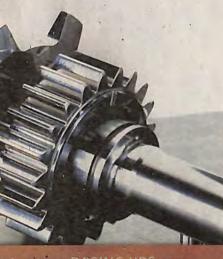
Daytona 2005.

Whether a driver needs a uniform, a team needs a critical part, or a race official needs a checkered flag, the only delivery truck you'll see trackside every weekend is the Big Brown TrucksM.

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NASCAR

Driver reports

Insider Lee Spencer analyzes and grades the performances of the teams in the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup.

Why did the Chase drivers finish where they did?

Tony Stewart No. 20



Greg Biffle No. 16





The team's determination and loyalty to Stewart is unmatched. Once it figured out the new tire-spoiler combination, it was smooth sailing from Michigan in June to Homestead. In the final 22 races of the season, Smoke finished outside of the top 10 just three times. Kudos to the engine department for providing Stewart with incredible-and reliable-horsepower. If there were a higher grade, he would get it.

For the first time since graduating to Cup, Biffle was a player all season. But the consistency the No. 16 enjoyed early in the season dissipated as the Chase progressed. Nonetheless, his season-ending victory showed Biffle can win the title in 2006 if he improves on road courses and at Martinsville.

3 Carl Edwards No. 99



Mark Martin No. 6





Edwards exceeded all expectations with four victories and two poles. His ying to crew chief Bob Osborne's yang provides the perfect balance and makes Edwards a championship contender in 2006. If this team improves at short tracks, it will be lights out for the competition.

Martin and his team deserve an "A" for effort. He paced himself like a well-trained thoroughbred through the regular season and locked up a Chase spot. But wrecking at Talladega and a poor qualifying effort at Martinsville ruined his chances for a run at the title. He was eliminated before the last race.

Jimmy Johnson No. 48



6 Ryan Newman No. 12

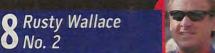


Johnson continued to be an excellent-qualifier who saves hiscar for when he needs it most during a race. Solid communication with crew chief Chad Knaus and a spot-on crew enabled Johnson to contend for victory in every race. Finishing fifth is a huge letdown, and the disappointment of his last race will make him more determined for 2006.

If points were awarded for winning poles, Newman, who had eight this season, would have been a player. The momentum from winning at New Hampshire should have kept him in the title hunt. But after finishing in the top five in the first three races, the team was buried on most of the intermediate tracks. Time to return to the drawing board with the Charger.

Matt Kenseth







For a driver in a rebuilding year, Kenseth recovered quite well. He is on top of his game but needs the support of a strong nucleus in order to return to championship form. The losses of his longtime car chief and spotter will mean similar challenges in 2006.

What more could Wallace have done? He raced his guts out and climbed as high as second in points before his luck turned sour at Talladega. Despite his success during the se'ason, Wallace led just one lap in the Chase. If you don't lead, you can't win. Regardless, fans should remember Wallace as going out among NASCAR's elite.

Jeremy Mayfield



Kurt Busch



Is "git 'er done" not in the No. 19 team's vocabulary? Talk about performance anxiety-the boys made it to the dance and developed two left feet. Crew chief Slugger Labbe abandoned the team six races into the Chase, which hurt its morale and confidence.

You've got to play to win. Busch, the defending champion, was fifth in points coming in, but a wreck three laps into the first Chase race sealed the No. 97's fate. Getting canned for an off-track incident was a sad way to say goodbye to Roush Racing.

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COLLEGE BASKETBALL

INSIDER MIKE DeCOURCY

decourcy@sportingnews.com

If Oregon isn't running by the time it hits the Pac-10, duck!

The Ducks need to speed up their waddle

he curious thing about
Oregon last season was not
that it wound up scraping
along the .500 line nor that
the Ducks finished eighth in
the Pac-10 and found themselves
sitting out another NCAA
Tournament. It's that it all
happened at a pace better suited
for a Jane Austen movie.

The slow drip of agony began with a 77-51 win over Idaho State. A

Perhaps

Missouri's

administration

had the future

in mind when it

Quin Snyder for

a make-or-break

season. Mizzou's

coaches were

banned from

recruiting until

off-campus

earlier this

new coach

would have

those

been bound by

restrictions. If

necessary next

spring, Snyder's

will start fresh.

replacement

a change is

November: a

brought back

victory, sure, but also an omen. The coaches had spent the preseason emphasizing their "speed kills" philosophy, and the Ducks instead waddled to a 70.9 scoring average that hardly thrilled.

So when they opened this season by ringing up only 75 points in an exhibition against Southern Oregon, coach Ernie

Kent had to concede, "It's just not where we want to be yet."

Oregon was one of the youngest teams in Division I last season, with 85.6 percent of its (not so many) points scored by freshmen and sophomores. Inexperienced players must be taught to play with greater effort and defend at a higher leveland also how to run.

With wings Malik Hairston and Bryce Taylor and point guard Aaron Brooks, Oregon has enough players who should be effective at greater speeds. But the progress is coming gradually.

Rhythm. That's Kent's term.

Although some high school games feature fullcourt presses and plenty of layups, true fast breaks are not prominent because courts are

smaller and the expertise required is beyond average high school point guards. Players such as Hairston and Taylor become more comfortable looking for shots in a halfcourt . setup when they could be devastating on the break. Hairston can wreck defenders with a bounce or two, and Taylor's long-range shooting provides another option against a scrambling

defense.

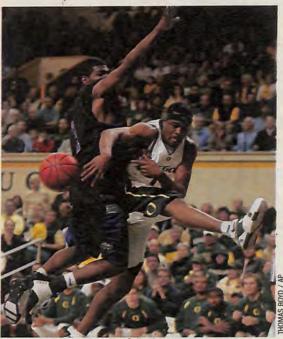
Most regulars have been in
Oregon's system at least a year, so
Kent now can teach more than the
basics. One exception is Ivan
Johnson, a 6-8 junior college
transfer. He gives the Ducks a prime
low-post option in transition.

■ **Distribution.** Brooks averaged 4.6 assists as a sophomore, roughly

half of what he should manage surrounded by solid scoring options in a fast-paced attack. Kent believes Brooks' experience trying out for the U.S. under-21 national team— Brooks was one of the final cuts helped him mature as a point guard.

energy. The team's primary energy guy is the coach's son, wing Jordan Kent. He spent the fall as a Ducks-wide receiver and only now is getting back to basketball. He'll return to football 10 days before the team's bowl game.

Defense. Kent says the fast break is not an offensive tactic—it's a philosophy that dictates how a team shapes its entire game. "Defense gives you the opportunity to run," he says. "When this team



Hairston has the skills—and now the experience to thrive playing at a breakneck pace.

understands that getting stops means blocking out, rebounding and getting in transition—those become easy buckets for you."

Pace and productivity—that's what the Ducks need to book a trip to the NCAA Tournament this season. The slower they move, the further the journey will seem. TSN



Washington has found an ideal role for transfer G Ryan Appleby, who struggled to perform consistently at Florida. Appleby, who is slight at 6-1, 170, is being used primarily as a shooting specialist. He has been sold on the role with comparisons to Steve Kerr. John Paxson and Craig Hodges. In the Huskies' first three games, Appleby played 21.0 minutes per game and shot 15 3-pointers. ➤ Wake Forest PG Justin Gray struggled with turnovers in his first four games after converting from shooting guard and was an obvious victim of officials' early emphasis on calling palming violations. He also wasn't able to find many good 3-point -opportunities for himself, and the Deacons need his long-range shooting. The good news is that Gray consistently is getting the ball to C Eric Williams. Feeding the post isn't easy, even for established point guards. > Maryland is pleased with the early results from sophomore PF James Gist, probably the program's most talented player and a strong candidate to become the team's leading scorer. Gist can help himself in that department by becoming more active on the offensive boards. He should be able to put his athleticism to better use. > Ohio University coach Tim O'Shea was excited about bullish freshman PFJerome Tillman (6-6, 237), who performed well in the Bobcats' scrimmage at Boston College. O'Shea figured Tillman

freshman PF-Jerome Tillman
(6-6, 237), who performed well in
the Bobcats' scrimmage at Boston
College. O'Shea figured Tillman
might become a starter by the
Mid-American Conference season.'
Now, because of a bout with
mononucleosis, he'll just be getting
back to action about the time MAC
play begins. O'Shea plans to bridge
the gap with senior Jeff Halbert, a

selfless, tough player.

< COUNTERPOINTS >

Who has the best recruiting class for 2006?

Ohio State

One player makes all the difference

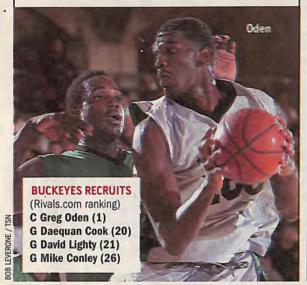
Had Ohio State signed Greg Oden—and only Oden—I still might be making the argument the Buckeyes recruited the nation's best class.

Ohio State did not just get the No. 1 player for 2006. Oden, a 7-0 center from Lawrence North High in Indianapolis, will be the most dominant player to enter college since Shaquille O'Neal arrived at LSU 16 years ago.

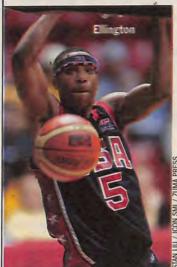
That's the difference here. North Carolina's boatload of elite prospects might form a championship team. And Ohio State wouldn't have done badly just with Daequan Cook, David Lighty and Mike Conley. But Oden is a once-in-a-generation player.

That has been my stance all along: Russell, Chamberlain, Jabbar, Walton, Ewing, O'Neal ... Oden. He belongs in that lineage. Which is why no one recruited better than Ohio State this year.

-Mike DeCourcy



North Carolina Tar Heels' overall talent is overwhelming



TAR HEELS RECRUITS

(Rivals.com ranking)

F Brandon Wright (5)

G Wayne Ellington (9)

F Alex Stepheson (57)

F Deon Thompson (69)

F William Graves (NR)

G Ty Lawson (13)

form an explosive backcourt duo—they could have stepped into college this year and made a major impact. Brandon Wright highlights the

What

separates North

Ohio State is the

volume of great

players headed

to Chapel Hill:

The Tar Heels

landed a class

that could be

as one unit-

plus a sixth

and Wayne

Ellington will

man.

put on the floor

Ty Lawson

Carolina from

this year and made a major impact. Brandon Wright highlights the frontcourt haul, and his versatility allows him to defend either forward or the center. He is long, can score and fits perfectly with the uptempo style

preferred by his backcourt teammates and coach Roy Williams.

Deon Thompson and Alex Stepheson are big men with great upside; you will see them get better as they get stronger. William Graves can handle the ball.

The Tar Heels are in rebuilding mode this season, but this class will help put them back in the Final Four hunt. —Tim Walts

FIVE on the rise

Schools that have bright futures, thanks to their recruiting hauls during the early signing period:

Washington. The Huskies have put together two straight great classes. The top catch for 2006: center Spencer Hawes. Don't be surprised to see the Huskies in the Final Four in the near future.

Georgetown. After putting together a top 10 class for 2006, John Thompson received an oral commitment from Austin Freeman, one of the best shooting guards in the class of '07.

Gonzaga. Perhaps the best recruit with the least fanfare this signing period was Matt Bouldin, the 45th-ranked player in the country. He is the quintessential Zag, right down to the shaggy hair and deadeye perimeter shooting. Bouldin will have an Adam Morrison-like impact right away.

UAB. The Blazers aren't usual suspects in the top 25 recruiting rankings, but Mike Anderson and his staff aggressively landed players who are perfect for their pressing style.

Arkansas. Elite junior college players are becoming a rare breed in college basketball recruiting, but Arkansas has a future star in Sonny Weems of Arkansas-Fort Smith. He has the tools to make a huge splash:—Rivals.com



Looking for info on all the top recruits? You can find rankings, blogs and more from Rivals.com on TSN's website. Go to sportingnews.com/cbasketball

Arizona has decided to continue recruiting F Lance Thomas, even though the Wildcats had indicated they would move on if he hadn't committed to

the program by November 16, the close of the early signing period. The recruitment of Thomas, one of the top unsigned seniors, will be an interesting story line to follow in the late period. Along with Arizona, he still is considering Georgia Tech, Duke, Rutgers, Florida and Wake Forest. > The top two unsigned seniors are F Davon Jefferson of Patterson, N.C., and

F Darrell Arthur of Dallas. Jefferson is considering Kansas,
Oklahoma State, Louisville, Southern California and UNLV; Arthur
has Indiana, Kansas, Baylor and SMU on his list. > Now that most of the
top players from the class of 2006 have signed, coaches are looking to lock up

some of the best talent in the junior class. Last week, Gs Jerryd Bayless and Alex

Legion picked their college destinations, and both will stay close to home. Bayless, from Phoenix, committed to Arizona; Legion, from Detroit, picked Michigan.

Maryland received a commitment from a member of the junior class,

Baltimore's PF Braxton Dupree, a Lonny Baxter clone. The Terps also should get a commitment from another Baltimore player, PF Dino Gregory, and they are trying to land Philadelphia G Jeff Jones > Syracuse already had four commitments from the class of 2007 before striking gold with versatile PF Donte Green > Much has been made about the efforts of Ohio State coach

Thad Matta and his 2006 class. But did you know he has

secured 10 commitments in just over a year? That dates to **Sylvester**Mayes and **Brayden Bell** from the class of '05 and includes **Walter Offutt** of the class of '08. Now that's getting it done. —*Rivals.com*

INSIDER KEN ROSENTHAL

Ichiro and Hargrove don't see eye to eve, even, it seems, about whether they see eve to eve.



The Yankees, Dodgers and Giants would be at the front of the line if Ichiro requested a trade because of his frustration with Mike Hargrove.

Relationship rescue: Dr. Phil would say just win, baby



egardless of who is to blame, Mariners manager Mike Hargrove is in the middle of a fight he can't win. Either Hargrove repairs his relationship with Ichiro Suzuki or Hargrove soon will be looking for another job.

Hargrove and Mariners general manager Bill Bavasi deny a rift exists between the manager and the right fielder, but Ichiro's complaints to Japanese media about the atmosphere around the team reflect his frustration with Hargrove's leadership.

Several people with knowledge of the situation say there are philosophical differences between Ichiro and Hargrove and that Ichiro perceives Hargrove to be too laid-back, which creates an undisciplined environment. Those people say the relationship, from Ichiro's perspective, is "untenable" and "potentially irreconcilable."

Hargrove disagrees. "We have a good relationship, a working relationship," the manager says. "I don't know that there's anything bad about it."

Ichiro doesn't want to be traded; he is comfortable in Seattle. His sentiment could change, however, if the Mariners fail to address his concerns. Both Ichiro's and Hargrove's contracts expire after the 2007 season. At this point, it's difficult to imagine Ichiro's signing an extension if Hargrove stays.

The risk for Hargrove is obvious: Ichiro is a Japanese star playing for mostly Japanese ownership and is a central figure in the Mariners' marketing efforts. Hargrove, a . manager with no previous link to the club, is much more disposable.

The Mariners are coming off

speed read -

The bidding for free-agent A.J. Burnett could rise to six years and \$72 million, an insane price for a pitcher with past arm trouble and a sub-.500 career record. Even with the labor agreement expiring after next season, owners and players will be in no position to complain. There's plenty of money in the game.

back-to-back 90-loss seasons, the first of which occurred under Bob Melvin. It is not unusual for star players to grow frustrated under such circumstances. Nor is it unusual for certain teammates and superiors to grow frustrated with a star player, which seems to be occurring with Ichiro in Seattle.

Some of Ichiro's differences with Hargrove are cultural; Ichiro brought different ideas from Japan about how to play the game. But their conflict also is typical of those that routinely fill sports pages. Ichiro never will be Terrell Owens, but like most superstars, Ichiro is stubborn and wants things a certain way.

Though some Mariners share Ichiro's negative opinion of Hargrove, others praise the manager. "Hargrove is doing a great job as far as handling the players," says second baseman Bret Boone, who was traded by the team this past season. "And that comes from someone who had the year I had."

Some people, both inside and outside the Mariners' clubhouse, view Ichiro as inflexible and selfish. The complaints range from his

failure to dive for balls to his reluctance to steal bases in tight situations to his preoccupation with personal statistics.

"I would not characterize him as a selfish player," Bavasi says. "But I think you have to talk to him to understand that."

Hargrove does not seem dissatisfied. "He may be the most prepared player I've ever had," says Hargrove, who managed the Indians for nine seasons and the Orioles for four. "I thought Albert Belle prepared as well as anybody I've ever seen. Ichiro takes it beyond Belle."

The solution is the same as it always is in these situations-the team must win. If it happens, Hargrove's laissez-faire style will be much less of an issue, as will Ichiro's idiosyncratic approach. But if the losing continues, Ichiro's frustration will only increase. Some things are not lost in the translation: When it's superstar vs. manager, the superstar almost always wins.

Ken Rosenthal is FOXSports.com senior baseball writer. His Insider column is special to the Sporting News.

Diamondbacks RHPJavier Vazquez, who has exercised his right to demand a trade, isn't adamant about landing with an East Coast club. A trade to the Cardinals, Cubs or Indians would satisfy his desire to get closer to his native Puerto Rico. Upon learning of the Blue Jays' five-year, \$50 million offer to free-agent RHPA.J. Burnett, one executive said, "If Billy (Beane) was hesitating on trading (LHPBarry) Zito, I would think this would have him placing billboards saying, 'Former Cy Young winner for sale, lightly used,' outside every team's stadium." Zito, a free agent after next season, is owed a mere \$8.25 million in 2006. > Dayton Moore 's decision to remain a Braves assistant G.M. rather than pursue the Red Sox's G.M. job raises questions about which Braves executive might succeed current G.M.John Schuerholz. Moore's

continuing ascent could lead Frank Wren, also a Braves assistant G.M., to pursue another position. > New Phillies G.M.Pat Gillick is expected to do something big;

RFBobby Abreu would be perfect for the Cubs, giving them a lefthanded slugger to hit between righthanders 1B Derrek Lee and 3B Aramis

Ramirez, or for the Mariners, who also want to add lefthanded power.

> Lee no doubt is rooting for his White Sow counterpart, free agent Paul Konerko, to get a monster deal. Lee has an .864 career on-base/slugging percentage (Konerko's is .837), and Lee might be the best defensive first baseman in the game. > The Cardinals could lose

both 2B Mark Grudzielanek and IFAbraham Nunez as free agents. Nunez wants to play regularly. The Red Sox, Rangers, Royals and Mets are pursuing Grudzielanek.



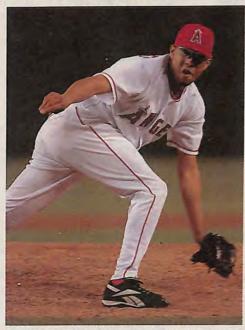
A. L. REPORT MLB.com

RED SOX RHP Mike Timlin will turn 40 in March, but don't expect his play to decline much next season. He continues to rely heavily on his sinking fastball, which still hits the mid-90s. His second pitch, a slider, has a sharp bite. In addition, Timlin is one of the best fielding pitchers in the league. ... Runners don't take liberties against RANGERS C Rod Barajas, and the club's pitchers feel comfortable throwing to him.

Offensively, he has home run power and usually hits at the bottom of the order. ... BLUE JAYS SS Russ Adams, 25, showed good plate discipline and emerging power last season and finished the year as the club's leadoff hitter. Adams, a lefthanded hitter, can spray singles all over the park, but he pulls most of his extrabase hits. ... The re-signing of Hideki Matsui gives the **YANKEES** some flexibility in the outfield. Matsui likely will return to left field, but the team could sign a left fielder and shift Matsui to center, where he played frequently in Japan. Matsui doesn't possess ideal speed in center, but he gets good jumps on balls. ... ROYALS

SS Angel Berroa needs to be more consistent. He can make dazzling plays, but his concentration can lapse on routine pickups and throws. He has good power but tends to overswing and chase pitches. ... Expect ATHLETICS RHP Joe Blanton to report to camp lighter than his

season-ending weight of about 235 pounds. The club thinks improved conditioning will allow him to field his position better and consistently work deeper into games. ... Craig Monroe's progress the past couple of years likely has earned him the TIGERS' left field job. Monroe, who once was only able to pound fastballs, has worked to become a consistent hitter against all sorts of pitching and has shortened his



Rodriguez got his groove back in the final third of the season—a good sign for 2006.

swing against junkballers. ... Jerry
Owens could prove to be the speedy
top-of-the-order option WHITE SOX
manager Ozzie Guillen wants to
complement OF Scott Podsednik. He
had a great season for Class AA
Birmingham and was hitting above

.400 in the Venezuelan winter league. ... David Newhan's versatility could make him an integral player for the ORIOLES in 2006. He can play all over the outfield and infield. He's hard-nosed, and his speed provides a spark. ... MARINERS CF Jeremy Reed could become a Gold Glove winner, but he needs to improve on offense and add some muscle during the offseason. He has the potential to produce 15 to 20 home

runs and hit close to .300. ... ANGELS RHP Francisco Rodriguez, the closer, reclaimed control of the strike zone during the last third of the season. He spotted his fastball early in counts and got outs with his hard-breaking slider. ... TWINS CF Toril Hunter, who's recovering from a broken ankle, recently began running and cutting drills but says he's still a few weeks away from swinging a bat. He's expected to be at full strength in spring training. ... If DEVIL RAYS IF Nick Green plays regularly, it could help him resist his tendency to

resist his tendency to press. He put up decent numbers in the first half of 2005, playing in 71 games, before slumping in the second half and playing in 40 games. ... INDIANS RHP Adam Miller, who's coming off an

elbow injury, didn't have any setbacks while playing in the Arizona Fall League. If the club has to make a high-profile trade for a good hitter, Miller, the premier pitcher in its farm system, likely will be part of the

Playing to strengths

Expect new Tigers manager Jim Leyland to look for ways to better use Nook Logan, who lost the starting center field job early last season because of hitting struggles. One possibility is occasionally starting Logan and OF Curtis Granderson at the same time, which would create a



small-ball lineup that sacrifices power for speed and defense.

SCOUTING REPORTS

If OF Jacque Jones departs as a free agent, Lew Ford will be a top candidate to start in right field for the Twins. Ford has an above-average arm and good range, though he has been prone to mental lapses. He's primarily a pull hitter. ... OF Jay Payton supplied much-needed pop for the A's last season after being acquired at the All-Star break. Although he's most comfortable playing center field, he's above average in left and right and has a strong, accurate arm. ... Indians C Victor Martinez is adept at recognizing pitches. When he gets a pitch he can handle, he regularly drives it into a gap.



No longer a one-trick Yankee

The Yankees' **Bubba Crosby** used to be considered an ideal utility player who had a good glove but no bat. But after working with hitting coach **Don Mattingly** on correcting his uppercut swing, Crosby was hitting more line drives and fewer fly balls, and he batted .327 in the final month of the season. He could be given a shot as the starting center fielder if the Yankees don't find any appealing options this winter.



CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Tom Singer; Boston, Ian Browne; Chicago, Scott Merkin; Cleveland, Justice B. Hill; Detroit, Jason Beck; Kansas City, Dick Kaegel; Los Angeles, Mike Scarr; Minnesota, Mark Sheldon; New York, Mark Feinsand; Oakland, Mychael Urban; Seattle, Jim Street; Tampa Bay, Bill Chastain; Texas, Robert Falkoff; Toronto, Spencer Fordin.

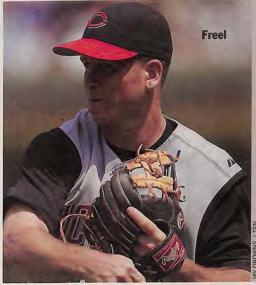
BASEBALL REPORT MLB.com

The PADRES' primary need for 2006, improved outfield defense, should be resolved by last week's trade with the METS that netted CF Mike Cameron, Cameron, who was acquired for 1B/OF Xavier Nady, has few peers chasing down balls in the gaps, a high priority with Petco Park's vast expanses. The METS plan to use Nady in right field, which might be a signal that the club will pursue a trade to get MARLINS 1B Carlos Delgado. ... CUBS LHP Rich Hill has a big-bending curveball, but until he develops another pitch, the best role for him will be as a reliever. He used to be bothered by walks but has improved the mental part of his game. ... Lance Niekro has some work to do if he wants to be the GIANTS' starting first baseman. After a strong start in 2005, Niekro struggled to hit for average and power. He had particular trouble against righthanders. The team could retain J.T. Snow or acquire a first baseman with punch. ... ASTROS RF Jason Lane hit 26 home runs last season but also was relegated to some platooning because of his droughts. The team expects Lane to be much more consistent in 2006, and some scouts think he can hit 40 homers. ... NATIONALS RF Jose Guillen hoped to avoid surgery, but an MRI revealed a slightly torn labrum in his left shoulder. He hurt the shoulder sliding headfirst in June but never went on the D.L. Guillen tried weight training to strengthen the shoulder, but the pain persisted. ... After being limited the previous two offseasons by an elbow injury, **DIAMONDBACKS LF Luis Gonzalez** once again is working on his upper-body strength. Gonzalez couldn't pull the ball with authority in

2004, and he struggled getting around on good fastballs in the second half of 2005. ... RHP David Weathers and **LHP Kent Mercker** were solid when pressed into sharing the closer role, but the REDS would prefer for them to be setup men. The team hopes RHP Todd Coffey is ready to close. .. Reggie Abercrombie improved his

chances of being the **MARLINS**' fourth outfielder with a strong finish in the Arizona Fall

League, in which he hit .300 and showed a little power. Abercrombie also can steal bases. ... The BREWERS' Bill Hall made huge strides at the plate last season, learning to lay off low-and-away breaking balls. Now, Hall needs to sharpen his defense. He figures to improve if he gets a chance to play one position, third base, after bouncing around. ... After two strong seasons coming out of the bullpen, RHP Ryan Madson apparently will be given a chance to start for the PHILLIES. He mixes three pitches and has a funky delivery that keeps hitters off-balance. ... PIRATES IF Yurendell DeCaster is off to a sizzling start in the Venezuelan winter league. It still will be tough for him to make the Pirates next season. ... ROCKIES prospect Jeff Baker. whose Class AAA season was curtailed by injuries to his right hand



and left wrist and a concussion, is healthy. For now, plans to move Baker from third base to the outfield have been tabled. ... The CARDINALS picked up the option on

RHP Jeff Suppan. He relies on his command but has better stuff than he's given credit for. Suppan had a strong second half, during which his fastball seemed to have extra life. ... BRAVES 18 Adam LARoche's

BRAVES 1B Adam LaRoche's inconsistencies during his first two big-league seasons had more to do with his plate approach than his unorthodox golflike swing. With two strikes, LaRoche needs to focus on putting the ball in play. ... Matt Kemp of the DODGERS capped a breakout stin in the Arizona Fall League with two-home rūns in the title game. Because of his size (6-4, 210) and strong arm, Kemp is projected as a right fielder, but he's athletic enough to play center.

SCOUTING REPORTS

Ryan Freel figures to be the Reds' primary second baseman after being a supersub the past two seasons. Freel will bring badly needed speed to the top of the lineup. He has yet to master a position defensively and is prone to injuries because of his reckless style. ... Phillies 1B Ryan Howard had a huge September after going to a more compact stance and moving closer to the plate. That allowed him to better reach outside pitches, and he consistently drove them to left-center. ... RHP Cesar Carrillo could be a valuable long reliever and spot starter for the Padres next season. He can throw 96 mph with excellent command. But because he is only 177 pounds, his durability is a concern. ... Nationals G.M. Jim Bowden compares lefthanded-hitting OF Ryan Church to Jim Edmonds because of Church's power potential. He will be an everyday player in 2006-if he can stay healthy.



Counting pitches

Astros closer **Brad Lidge** threw 24 fewer innings in 2005 than '04, but fatigue still might have been a reason for his struggles in the postseason, when he was plagued by home runs and inconsistent command. Lidge's pitch counts consistently were higher in 2005; for instance, he threw 248 pitches over 17½ innings in September alone. The Astros aren't worried about Lidge's confidence next season, but they will need to be mindful of his workload.



On the mend

Braves C Johnny Estrada has begun Pilates workouts to help regain strength in his back and improve his flexibility. After a hard collision at the plate in early June, Estrada battled back spasms and couldn't rotate fully while swinging from either side of the plate. If he doesn't regain his All-Star form of 2004, Estrada could lose playing time to **Brian McCann**, who is coming off a promising rookie season.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Steve Gilbert; Atlanta, Mark Bowman; Chicago, Carrie Muskat; Cincinnati, Anthony Castrovince; Colorado, Thomas Harding; Florida, Charlie Nobles; Houston, Alyson Footer; Los Angeles, Ken Gurnick; Milwaukee, Adam McCalvy; New York, Marty Noble; Philadelphia, Ken Mandel; Pittsburgh, Ed Eagle; St. Louis, Matthew Leach; San Diego, Lyle Spencer; San Francisco, Rich Draper; Washington, Bill Ladson.

PLAYACTION

BY BRENDAN ROBERTS

As Fantasy Source writers, our jobs are to entertain and inform readers. However, sometimes our e-mailers do the

entertaining. We get hundreds of e-mails a day, from the Netherlands to Hawaii. A few excerpts (and responses) since the start of the season:

From a Michigan reader: The NFL injury report has become the Ouija board of fantasy football.

That statement is listed as probable.

From New Jersey: Why isn't Darrell Jackson back? I had the same knee surgery and was better than ever after two weeks.

I'm guessing you don't play pro football.

From New York: It seems half the

Packers are in the ICU. The ICU must be

in the basement.

From Ohio: In response to your reference to the strip bingo scene from Cocoon (TSN, Oct. 28), is that scene comparable to the hand between two pillows scene from Planes, Trains and Automobiles?

Naked old people or Steve Martin's bum ... tough call there.



WEEK 12 STUDS Pos.

TSN experts



QB RB WR

Tom Brady, Patriots Curtis Martin, Jets Joe Horn, Saints

SLEEPERS

Mark Brunell, Redskins Chris Brown, Titans Jimmy Smith, Jaguars

STUMBLERS

Jake Delhomme, Parithers Thomas Jones, Bears Joey Galloway, Buccaneers

The Redskins open up the passing game to keep pace with the Chargers



OB RB WR

OB

RB

Matt Hasselbeck, Seahawks Tiki Barber, Giants Chad Johnson, Bengals

Steve McNair, Titans Antowain Smith, Saints Reggie Brown, Eagles

Jake Delhomme, Panthers Willis McGahee, Bills Joey Galloway, Buccaneers

Johnson will build on his earlier performance (91 yards) against the Ravens



Tom Brady, Patriots Steven Jackson, Rams Santana Moss, Redskins

Byron Leftwich, Jaguars Cedric Houston, Jets Bobby Engram, Seahawks

Drew Brees, Chargers Clinton Portis, Redskins Steve Smith, Panthers

It will be a cold day in Buffalo for the Panthers' passing game

From

Michigan: Am I a moron for putting my faith in a guy (Ricky Williams) who desperately needs a shave?

Here's hoping your trust doesn't go up in smoke.

From New York: I can't sleep at night because I can't decide

whether to start Brian Finneran or

Chris Chambers.

Start Chambers and call me in the morning. From Alaska: Thanks for all your help ... I'm having my worst year in four years. Um ... you're welcome?

From New York: Should I start Andre Johnson over Keenan McCardell? ... Talk to me. Goose!

Since that e-mail, Johnson's season has wilted like the hair atop Anthony Edwards'

From Massachusetts: In our league, a team had a kicker on a bye week. The other teams spent the afternoon picking up every kicker in the league and then dropping those kickers so they would be on the waiver wire for Sunday and the original team would not be able to play a kicker.

Ouch! That might be the most unethical fantasy act I've witnessed.

From a female reader: I am very proud of my success. And to earn respect in this male-dominated pastime justifies, to me, that you guys are in trouble. Watch out-we girls are coming up.

Great to see. If there's one thing I've learned in life, it's not to mess with a motivated woman.

Turning the tables on defense

Buffalo, Washington and Tampa Bay have reputations for strong defenses, but a glance at our fantasy points allowed tables shows they don't stop running backs as well as one might think. In a span of six games before Week 11, all three teams were among the 10 most fantasy-friendly units in allowing points to running backs.

Rank	Rush YPG	Rush TDs	Fantasy PPG
1. Texans	166.4	9	29.0
2. Rams	162.0	8	29.0
3. 49ers	125.8	7	28.8
4. Jets	150.5	. 5	27.5
5. Bills	134.8	7	26.5
6. Raiders	116.8	5	25.2
7. Redskins	113.0	7 '	24.8
8. Buccaneers	104.5	4	24.5
9. Saints	145.0	4	24.3
10. Patriots	126.8	4	23.8
4			-Roger Kuznia

To check out our fantasy points allowed tables, go to fantasysource.sportingnews.com/nfl/.





Start Chambers or not? It's a guestion that caused one reader to toss and turn. Really.



From Nigeria to Liberty U to NFL stardom—I am not making this up.

Gado—this guy is something

ver hear of Samkon Kaltho Gado?
How about Sam Gado?
He had been Anonymous. On his 23rd birthday, he became Somebody. That day, Brett Favre handed him the football 25 times and threw it to him four times. That day, the woebegone Packers won their second game of the season. Against a Falcons defense thought good enough to get to the Super Bowl, Sam Gado ran for 103 yards and scored three touchdowns.

Samkon Gado. SAM-kon GAH-doh, 5-10, 226 pounds. He's now my favorite running back because I'm a sucker for stories that begin, "You'll never believe this, but"

You'll never believe this, but he was 9 years old and living in a rural Nigerian village without electricity when a church in South Carolina raised the money to reunite Sam Gado, his three sisters and their mother with his father, a Christian missionary who had come to America for the express purpose of learning enough to go back to Nigeria and do good.

So, after the game in Atlanta, what does Sam Gado do?

Calls his father in Nigeria.

"Oh, he was so excited," Gado said.

Is this a great world or what?

Five weeks before he became the NFL's . unlikeliest star, Sam Gado sat in the bleachers at a high school football game.

For all he knew, his football life was over. He'd made the practice squad in Kansas City, a big deal for an undrafted rookie out of an evangelical Christian college in the mountains of south central Virginia. Then on October 4, a Tuesday, the Chiefs let him go. That Friday, he sat in the bleachers to watch his old high school team play.

"That tells you what kind of humble guy Sam is," says Bill Currier, nine years an NFL defensive back, later Gado's coach at Ben Lippen High School in Columbia, S.C., and now the school's athletic director. "Best thing was, he wasn't discouraged.,Sam's had the numbers, 4.4, 4.5 speed, 230 pounds, benches 400 pounds. And he's always looking at the positive."

You'll never believe this, but Sam Gado wasn't a



Gado had been anonymous, but a few trips to the end zone changed that in no time.

big college star. Playing at a private Christian high school, he'd drawn no football factory recruiters. Then, in four seasons at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., Gado started two games. He did well, once running for 219 yards. But his career stats came to seven carries a game, 6 yards a carry.

Wait.

He started two games?

First he was behind two veterans in a one-back offense. Then he ripped a hamstring. Finally, he sat out three games his senior season thinking he'd redshirt, only to be asked to play when the starters were hurt.

So when did the unnoticed Sam Gado first think of himself as an NFL running back?

The surprising answer: "My first year in college."

, His coach, Ken Karcher, told him so. Once an NFL quarterback and pro coach, Karcher said, "Sam's like his idol, another Nigerian, Christian Okoye." Okoye was a 253-pound running back who played six seasons with the Chiefs, the last in 1992, Sam Gado's first year in America. "Sam's built like him, a little smaller but faster."

Now wait another minute. How many wanna-be pros spend four years in college content to start two games? While racking up a 3.66 GPA getting ready for medical school?

I suspect the answer is one. His name is Samkon Kaltho Gado, described by Karcher as the personification of Liberty's mission to shape "the whole person, academically, athletically, socially and spiritually. He has it all—character, the work ethic, courtesy, politeness."

No one expected Gado to be drafted by the NFL. But when no team invited him to a free-agent tryout, Karcher galled an old NFL colleague, Al Saunders, the Chiefs' offensive coordinator.

"I said, 'Al, I don't want you to miss Sam Gado. He can play in the National Football League. More important, he's a guy who will influence your locker room, your team and you. He will never disappoint you.' "

Gado was out of work less than two weeks when the Packers added him to their practice squad. About two weeks later, he was on the 53-man roster, their fifth running back and in for one play against the Bengals. But injuries moved him up, and the next week, against the Steelers, he carried 26 times for 62 yards and a touchdown. Then came Atlanta.

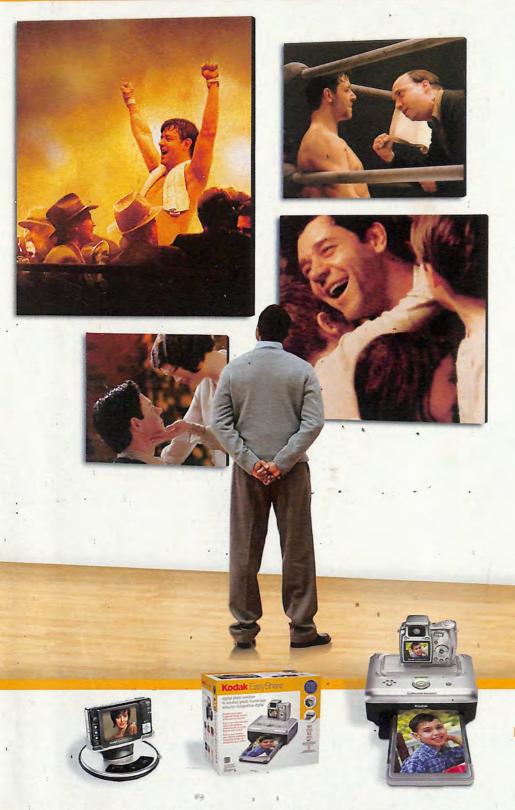
You'll never believe this, either, but when his football days are done, Sam Gado has a plan that has nothing to do with fame and money. He calls it "my obligation to my family." He wants to return to Nigeria as a doctor, perhaps as a surgeon, perhaps as an internist specializing in tropical medicine.

Don't you just love it?

TSN

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CONGRATULATIONS, TODD BODINE, ON BACK-TO-BACK VICTORIES.

Todd Bodine did it again in Phoenix. After taking his third win of the past five races and fourth on the season, Bodine gave his Germain Racing team a well-deserved pat on the back. Another Tundra driver having a great night was Johnny Benson with Bill Davis Racing, with a third-place finish. With this win, Team Tundra has taken an impressive eight of the past thirteen races. Guess it's what you'd call history repeating itself. toyota.com/nascar

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